INSIDE: MEET THE PRIVATE EQUITY INVESTORS CASHING IN ON *ROE*'S DEMISE

Mother Jones

March + April 2023

HIDE YOUR SONS

FASCIST INFLUENCERS ARE COMING FOR GEN Z

BY ALI BRELAND

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VOLUME 48
NUMBER 2

COVER: ILLUSTRATION BY MIKE MCQUADE; GETTY STOCK PHOTO POSED BY MODEL; ABOVE: MARK PETERSON/REDUX

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What is something surprising you learned working on this story?

My reporting reaffirmed that Gen Z and young millennials will not inevitably produce a better world. ***—Ali Breland, author, "Stream of Noxiousness," page 12***

Daily Wire's Jeremy Boreing ran a "safe space" club for Hollywood Republicans, whose membership included Clint Eastwood, Jon Voight, and Kelsey Grammer. ***—Eamon Whalen, author, "Lights, Camera, Propaganda," page 51***

I was surprised how easily prejudice can lead to a child being separated from loving family and community. ***—Natasha Donovan, illustrator, "Forever Home," page 30***

> **"THEY GOT TO WORK BUILDING AN UNDERGROUND DRUG LAB WITH 'THE TRAPPINGS OF A CIA OPERATION.'"**

From editor Hannah Levintova's investigation into the financiers who brought Mifeprex to market ("The Abortion Pill's Secret Money Men," page 42)

ON THE COVER

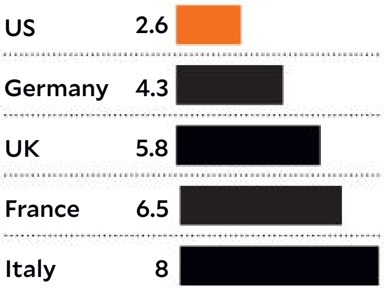
For Ali Breland's two investigations into corners of far-right culture, **MIKE MCQUADE**'s illustration of Pepe tearing through the face of a young white man is the perfect visual metaphor.

BY THE NUMBERS

Nick Fuentes, Kanye West, and Donald Trump have even more in common than you might think. Here's how many days they were kicked off Twitter between Jan. 1, 2021, and Jan. 1, 2023:

Fuentes	Ye	Trump
541	30	682

Despite their relatively high salaries, the ratio of doctors to patients in the United States is much lower than in similarly affluent countries:



59%

of registered voters deemed the mainstream media "a major threat to democracy."

34%

of Americans, a near record low, have a "great deal" or "fair amount" of confidence in the media to deliver the news "fully, accurately and fairly."

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A "BRUTAL, FEARFUL" TIME FOR JOURNALISM

Ad dollars are drying up—
and so are newsrooms.

BY MONIKA BAUERLEIN

CEO
MONIKA
BAUERLEIN

ADVERTISING USED TO BE what paid for journalism in America. Car dealerships and movie theaters brought us local newspapers and TVs; clubs and restaurants underwrote the alternative weeklies where I got my start; classified ads paid to send a reporter to your local city council meeting or state Capitol. Liquor and fashion brands brought us fat magazines with deeply reported stories wedged in among the lipstick ads.

But, as anyone who's picked up their skinny hometown newspaper lately can tell, that's over. The vast majority of advertising has moved to tech platforms; what little remains for publishers is getting cheaper and uglier by the day. Sure, mattresses and wool sneakers are still keeping podcasts afloat, and sponsored viral content has been good for digital-native publishers like *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*. But everyone knows that relying on advertising to pay for the news is ultimately a house of cards. The math just doesn't work. (Just one data point: At going rates, an article that 100,000 people read will bring in about $1,000 in revenue. How's that math going to work for investigative reporting—or simply covering local politics for that matter?)

When the economy is hot, this market failure is not as noticeable, because there are a lot of media startups burning through venture capital dollars. But all that goes poof at the slightest sign of cooling. Layoffs in the news business were up 20 percent as of December, with more coming amid what *Axios* called a "brutal, fearful" winter for media. To wit:

- *BuzzFeed*, once revered for finding the magic formula for making money in digital publishing, laid off 12 percent of its staff. Co-founder Jonah Peretti said it was partly because users are moving toward videos like those on TikTok, which are "still developing from a monetization standpoint."
- Vice Media, a once-invulnerable-seeming digital publisher, is cutting costs by 15 percent, according to its CEO.
- The tech website *Protocol*, launched by another former highflier—Robert Allbritton, the founder of *Politico*—shuttered. Both *Protocol* and *Politico* have been sold to Axel Springer, a German media conglomerate.
- The *Recount*, a startup that promised to "reinvent video journalism," laid off most of its staff after reportedly burning through $10 million in costs with $1 million in revenue.
- The newsletter startup Substack has told writers that it is cutting back on pay and benefits. Another newsletter company, Morning Brew, hailed just last year as a digital publishing wunderkind, is laying off 14 percent of its staff.
- The Jeff Bezos–owned *Washington Post* has discussed cuts of up to 10 percent of the newsroom as its ad business struggles.
- National Public Radio has announced a near total hiring freeze and paused its internship program because of a downturn in corporate sponsorships.
- Recurrent, a company that owns lots of big magazine names like *Field & Stream* and the military-focused *Task & Purpose*, laid off 52 employees.
- Just before the holidays, Gannett, the largest newspaper company in the country, announced the year's second round of layoffs—the previous one eliminated 400 jobs. (Gannett's CEO is paid nearly $8 million; the median salary at the company is $48,000.)
- And let's not forget Facebook, which has further ratcheted down how much news it allows people to see in their feed—making it far less likely for you to see articles from *Mother Jones* even if you follow us. Ditto any ads on those pages. Facebook also killed a program under which it paid some publishers for content, because "as a business it doesn't make sense to over-invest" in news.

At *Mother Jones*, we take advertising, both online and in print. It's a decision our founders made a long time ago, believing that *Mother Jones* should try to bring in money a lot of different ways. But for us, it's an auxiliary revenue stream, not a driving one. A few years ago, when I started as CEO, about 15 percent of our revenue came from ads. Today it's just 7 percent. For perspective, 74 percent of our current budget comes from donations and another 16 percent from subscriptions. In other words, from you—people who support our work not because you are forced to (after all, all of our journalism is free to read online) but because you believe in it.

In fact, we heard exactly that from you this winter, when we surveyed our email newsletter readers. (If you're not subscribed yet, I hope you'll try it. It's great, and free—*motherjones.com/newsletters*.) A total of 2,306 people shared comments, and reading them all was amazing.

Here's one: "So much reporting now is slapdash, clickbaity, entirely hot takes or opinion. Thank you for continuing to do deep dives, finding important stories, and not leaning on anger or sarcasm for clicks."

Another reader wrote: "There have been several times I've seen an issue covered well in *MJ*, then later it makes the mainstream press." And one more: "As a former Conservative Republican, I've been gravitating left for a few years, and my life was changed this summer when SCOTUS overturned *Roe*. After reading other news sources, *Mother Jones* is my top choice, and the only one I pay a subscription for."

Corporate America, billionaires, and ad dollars come and go. But you have stuck by us, 47 years running—and you are the reason why *Mother Jones*, even if by the skin of our teeth, will make it through whatever upheaval this year brings. Thank you. ■

OVID

WHEN LIFE NEEDS A DIFFERENT LENS

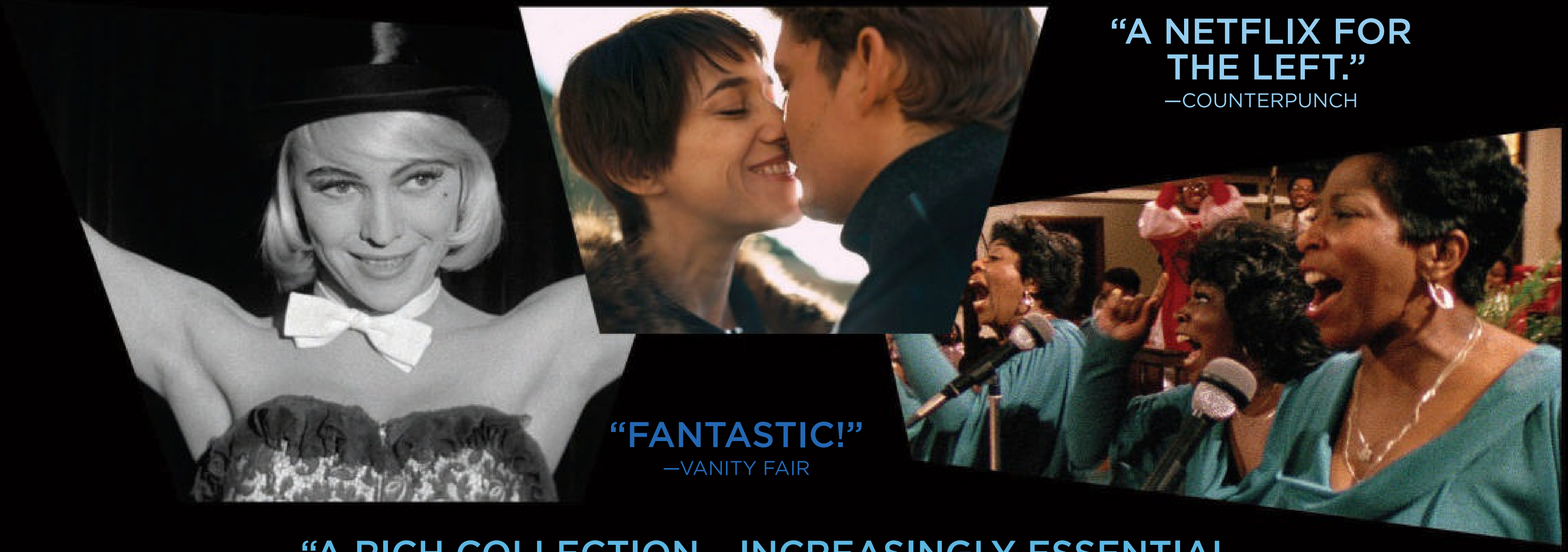
NO
GENTRIFICATION
WITHOUT
TAXATION
F.E

"A HAVEN FOR INDIE GEMS."
—THE NEW YORK TIMES

"WATCH, AND FEEL YOUR HEART AND MIND EXPAND."
—SLASHFILM

"A CORNUCOPIA OF INTERNATIONAL MOVIES AND DOCUMENTARIES."
—THE NEW YORKER

"A NETFLIX FOR THE LEFT."
—COUNTERPUNCH



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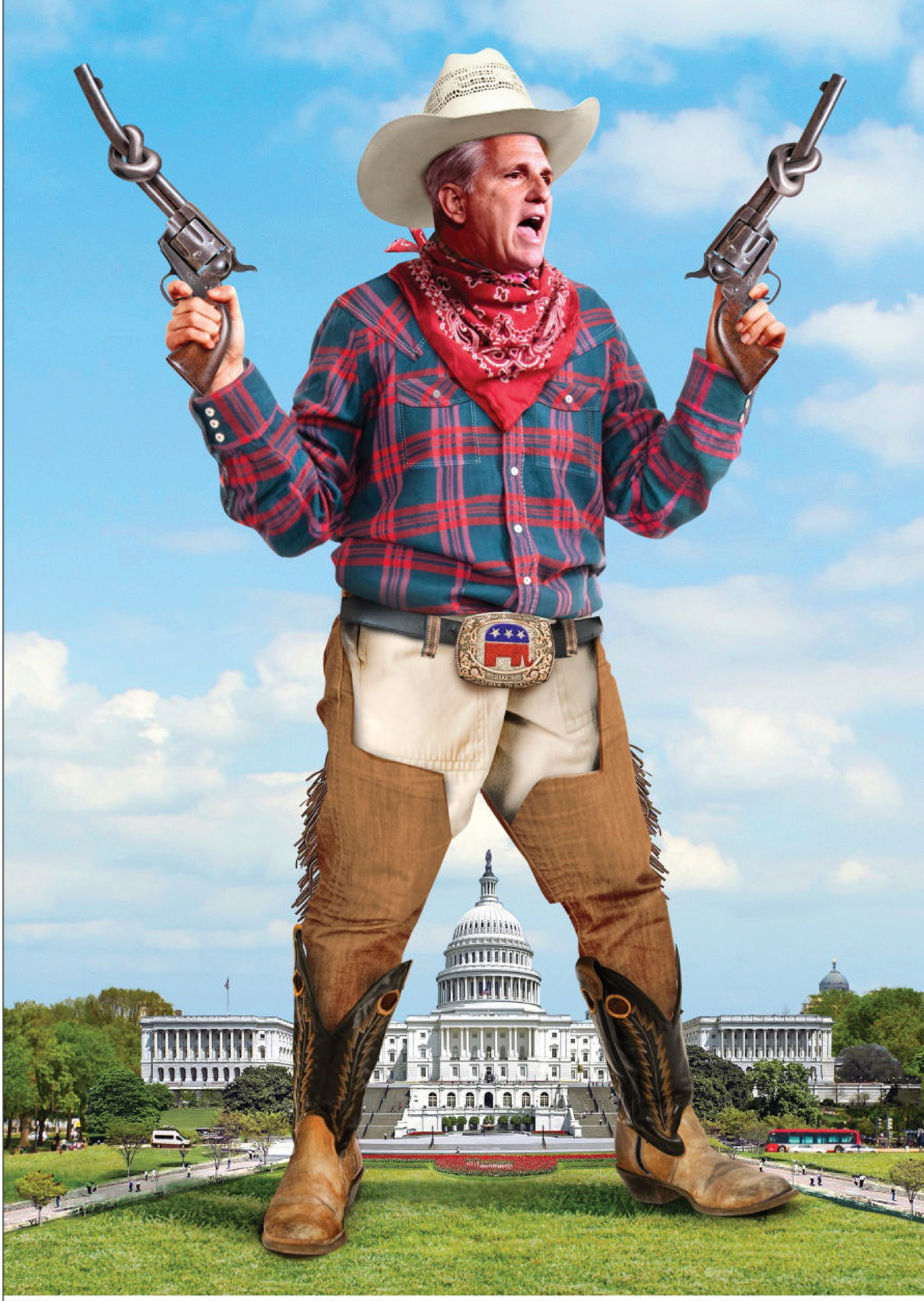


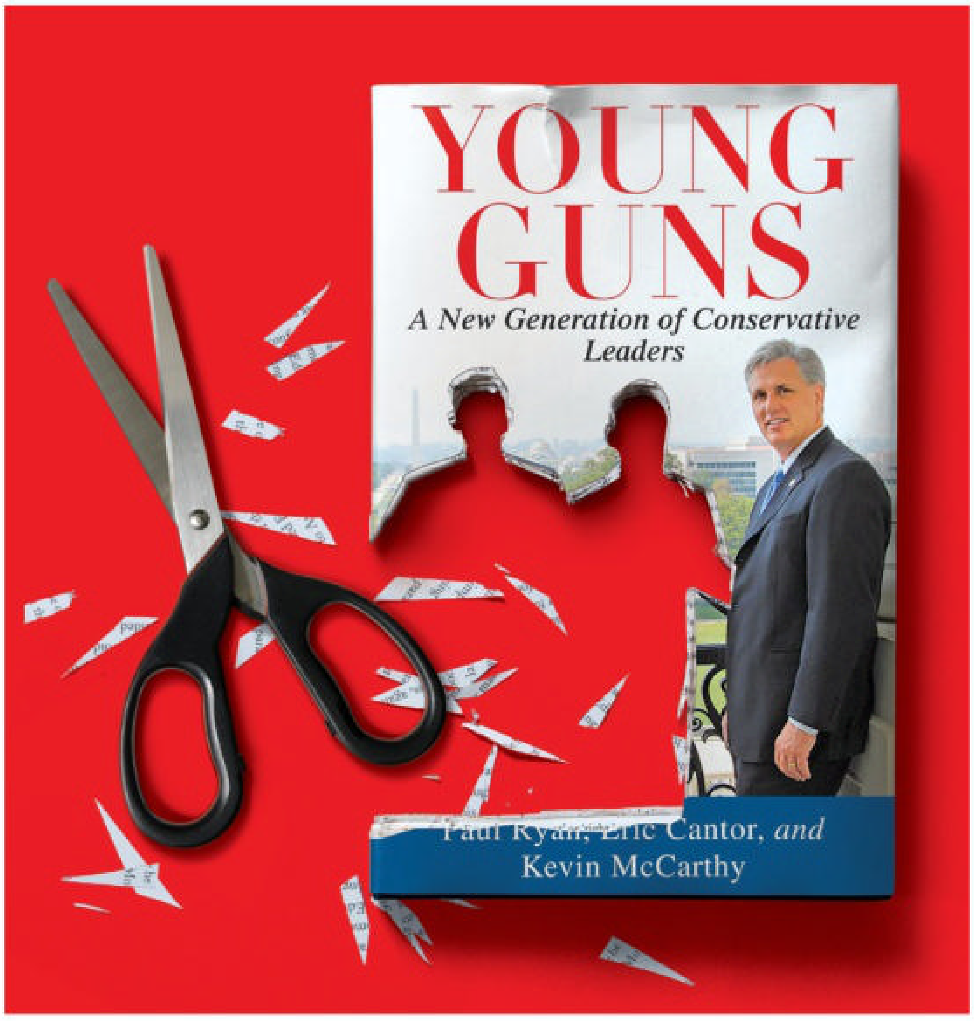
EMPTY CHAMBER

OUTGUNNED

Kevin McCarthy holds the gavel. Insurrectionists will run the House.

BY TIM MURPHY

ILLUSTRATIONS BY DOUG CHAYKA


YOUNG GUNS
A New Generation of Conservative Leaders
Paul Ryan, Eric Cantor, and Kevin McCarthy

IN THE SUMMER of 2011, as Washington deadlocked over the once-routine task of raising the nation's debt ceiling, Kevin McCarthy, then the House GOP whip, decided to mix things up. At a caucus meeting, the California Republican screened a clip from the heist movie *The Town*, where Ben Affleck and Jeremy Renner plot a violent act of revenge.

"I need your help," Affleck's character says. "I can't tell you what it is. You can never ask me about it later. And we're gonna hurt some people."

When the lights flicked on, Allen West, a first-term Florida congressman and Iraq veteran who had become a conservative hero for firing a gun while interrogating a detainee, rose to offer a version of Renner's response.

"I'm ready to drive the car," West said.

For McCarthy, his political ambitions have always come with a catch: To get where he wanted to go, he first had to hand over the keys. His elevation to speaker of the House in January on the 15th ballot was the culmination of his life's work and a demonstration of his powers. In nailing down a belligerent caucus, McCarthy leaned on relationships cultivated over a decade and a half on the campaign trail, at the Capitol, and on the fundraising circuit. But it was also a reminder of the compromises he'd made to get there. McCarthy won the gavel, but not the authority it traditionally vests, by ceding control to the insurrectionists and austerity-obsessed hardliners who blocked him 14 times. His victory was in many ways the story not just of his own career, but of the trio of Republican "Young Guns" with whom he rose through the ranks. If McCarthy is the last one standing, it is only because he surrendered long ago.

WHEN MCCARTHY POSED with Reps. Paul Ryan (R-Wis.) and Eric Cantor (R-Va.) for a *Weekly Standard* cover in the fall of 2007, their party was undergoing a generational collapse. The Republican revolution of the 1990s had produced brazen corruption and interventionism, and a string of ethically challenged leaders. One GOP speaker resigned in disgrace. Another turned out to be a child molester. What figureheads the party had were not just ineffectual, but kind of wooden. Democrats, on the other hand, had Barack Obama, someone conservatives accused of actually being too cool to be president. The three lawmakers, the magazine suggested, offered a new foundation. In the cover photo, Ryan's hair is parted like a 1920s banker. Cantor looks skeptical, as if someone just passed gas. McCarthy, awkwardly off to the side, looks like that someone is him.

From the start, the "Young Guns," as the cover read, were more a branding exercise than an argument, a phrase chosen because "Capitol Hill careerists fast approaching middle age" didn't work. They were the future because someone had to be. In the magazine's framing, and in the trio's subsequent 2010 bestseller, *Young Guns: A New Generation of Conservative Leaders*—Fred Barnes, a *Weekly Standard* editor whose son worked for McCarthy, wrote the foreword—Cantor was "the leader" and speaker-in-waiting. Ryan was "the thinker," a budget wonk who wrote about reining in Social Security and Medicare, and saving America from the "soft despotism" of a "takers" mentality. McCarthy's portion of the book was largely bereft of policy specifics. With little else to offer, he was "the strategist."

A longtime Republican staffer handed a Southern California district by his retiring boss, McCarthy spent much of his first campaign fundraising for other candidates. Once in office, he pored over demographic data and election returns, nurturing a reputation as a campaign savant. He read *The Almanac of American Politics* on cross-country flights. He dragged colleagues to watch *Moneyball* for strategic inspiration (movies, it seems, were his thing). In *Young Guns*, McCarthy described the kind of candidates he believed would return the party to greatness—people outside politics, who would not only run better races, but be better legislators.

But McCarthy wasn't a stickler. For a long time, the joke about candidates who bore the Young Guns' imprimatur was that they were actually kind of old. In 2010, after that bit of branding was adopted by the National Republican Congressional Committee, the *Daily Beast* calculated that the median Young Gun was almost 50. The oldest ever, Maryland's Amie Hoeber, was 74.

Ideology, temperament, and biography were negotiable too, as the definition of a Young Gun proved so broad as to be meaningless. Now-retired Rep. Louie Gohmert, a "FWD: FWD: FWD" email chain in human form, was listed in the book's appendix as an original member. In due time, Lauren Boebert and Madison Cawthorn would be NRCC-designated Young Guns. Wendy Rogers, who was later censured by the Arizona state

Senate for calling for her enemies to be publicly hanged, was twice a failed Young Gun. George Santos—whose campaign manager reportedly fundraised by impersonating McCarthy's chief of staff—claimed to be a Young Gun, and in a surprise twist, actually was.

The key to McCarthy's politics wasn't any particular code, but the lack of one—anyone who won a primary and hit their fundraising marks was invited in to the club. That lack of standards, and a willingness to embrace the party's increasingly rabid rank and file, was an ideology every bit as significant as Ryan's austerity—and ultimately more useful. McCarthyism was whatever Republicans were in the mood for.

THE *YOUNG GUNS* book was a Polaroid of anti-Obama conservatism, snapped just before its protagonists assumed the burdens of actual responsibility. It detailed how Democrats—and their health care law in particular—were ruining America, and how Republicans would save it. When they won, the bill came due. The tension between the image of three Young Guns in charge and the reality of their caucus has defined Congress ever since.

One after another, this new generation of leaders was undone by the new generation of conservatives they had anointed themselves to lead—and who demanded more than the triumvirate could deliver. Hardliners forced a 16-day government shutdown in 2013 by refusing to pass a budget unless it defunded the Affordable Care Act. These GOP representatives disliked Obama, but it sometimes seemed as if they disliked their leadership even more. Cantor fell first, losing a 2014 primary to an economics professor who said he'd sold out conservatives. The former majority leader, who now works at a Wall Street investment bank, eventually told *Washingtonian* that he "never believed" his rhetoric about repealing Obamacare in those years—but that he let conservatives think otherwise because the "anger" worked in his favor. His defeat confirmed the obvious: Republican leaders had unleashed forces they could not control.

McCarthy looked to be next. His 2015 bid for speaker in Cantor's wake failed after resistance from conservatives led by Rep. Jim Jordan. The caucus united around Ryan, whose budget—so severe and unpopular that it helped Obama win reelection after the Young Gun joined the 2012 GOP presidential ticket—was a point in his favor. But Ryan, too, struggled to control an unwieldy majority. The *Weekly Standard* no longer set the tone for conservatives in Washington—the House Freedom Caucus did.

Trump, though, offered McCarthy another chance. While Ryan and even Mitch McConnell sometimes expressed frustration with the guy who held the Oval Office, McCarthy charted a different course. During Trump's campaign, he stayed close while others denounced him, eventually becoming his chief enabler on the Hill—a man who questioned nothing, propping up a man who would say anything. He egged on the president's lies about the 2020 election and demonstrated fealty behind the scenes, once presenting the commander in chief with a jar of Starbursts with Trump's least-favorite flavors removed. There was never a better time in Republican politics to be a nihilist.

On January 6, 2021, as Trump supporters besieged the Capitol, McCarthy phoned the president and asked him to call off the dogs.

"Well, Kevin, I guess these people are more upset about the election than you are," Trump said.

"More upset?" McCarthy replied, according to one account. "They're trying to fucking kill me."

But getting ahead in the GOP meant taking death threats in stride. Although McCarthy said Trump "bears responsibility" in the riot's aftermath, and briefly considered a censure vote, he ultimately stuck by the president. When the chamber reconvened, he joined most House Republicans in voting to reject the election results. A few weeks later, after the tear gas had cleared, he flew to Mar-a-Lago to make sure there were no hard feelings. Trump, prone to handing out disparaging epithets, gave McCarthy a pet name instead: "My Kevin."

Today, *Young Guns* makes for a strange read. The book reflects wishful thinking for a golden age that never came, from a magazine that Trump outlasted: Conservatives craved something coarser and meaner than what Beltway lifers prescribed. The big idea—Ryan's budget—was political poison, the sort of bloodless think-tank pabulum that Trump made a mockery of as a candidate. The book name-checks Mitt Romney and Meg Whitman. "It's the party of Rubio, Jindal, and Daniels," Cantor wrote. Instead, it got "Kanye. Elon. Trump."

If McCarthy is the last Young Gun standing, it is only because he surrendered long ago.

One of the promising candidates McCarthy promoted in the book was Adam Kinzinger, a 32-year-old Illinois Air Force vet who once received an award from the Red Cross for rescuing a woman from a knife attack. The YG Action Fund, a super-PAC run by an ex–Cantor aide, later waded into a primary backing him against a 10-term Republican incumbent. Kinzinger, McCarthy said, would bring "accountability back to Washington." In a roundabout way, he was right; Kinzinger, who retired in January, voted to impeach Trump after the insurrection and defied McCarthy by serving as one of two Republicans on the January 6 committee.

"It's sad to see a man that I think has so much potential just totally sell himself," Kinzinger said recently. McCarthy, he predicted, would not even win his campaign for speaker.

He almost didn't. But McCarthy made it this far by embracing shamelessness as a value and appeasement as a path to power. To win, he needed to flip the guy who compared the rioters to tourists (Andrew Clyde of Georgia), and the woman who quoted Hitler on January 5 (Mary Miller of Illinois). He needed the vote of the representative who addressed a white nationalist conference and shared a meme of himself murdering a colleague (Paul Gosar of Arizona), and one from the person who posted on Facebook about executing Nancy Pelosi (Marjorie Taylor Greene). He agreed to gut his own powers and put the House Freedom Caucus behind the wheel. Above all, he needed to reassure some of Washington's most intransigent people that he was, once again, a new kind of conservative leader, poised to move his party on from failures of the past.

"He's different," Rep. Brian Mast of Florida said, nominating McCarthy for an eighth vote. "He's not Paul Ryan." ■

SCHOOL OF HARD TIME

THE PRISON PROFESSOR

Leo Hylton is on a mission to teach away incarceration, one Zoom at a time.

IN HIS 6.5-BY-14-FOOT cell, Leo Hylton keeps an unopened cherry-flavored Hint seltzer. Since March 2022, he's held on to the bottle as a prized possession, a "touchstone" that he says helps remind him of "the visceral feel" of the first day he spent outside the Maine State Prison in 12 years.

Hylton left for work. He's a co-instructor with Colby College's anthropology department. Alongside tenured professor Catherine Besteman, this spring for the second year running, he'll teach via Zoom from inside the walls about abolition—the movement to end incarceration. According to a number of experts in prison education, Hylton is the first professor of his kind in the United States.

Last March, the prison approved an unprecedented chance for Hylton to meet his students in person on their campus. He left under armed guard, wearing a freshly pressed blue button-down shirt and jeans—and handcuffs, belly chains, and hobbles that would clamp his legs if he tried to run.

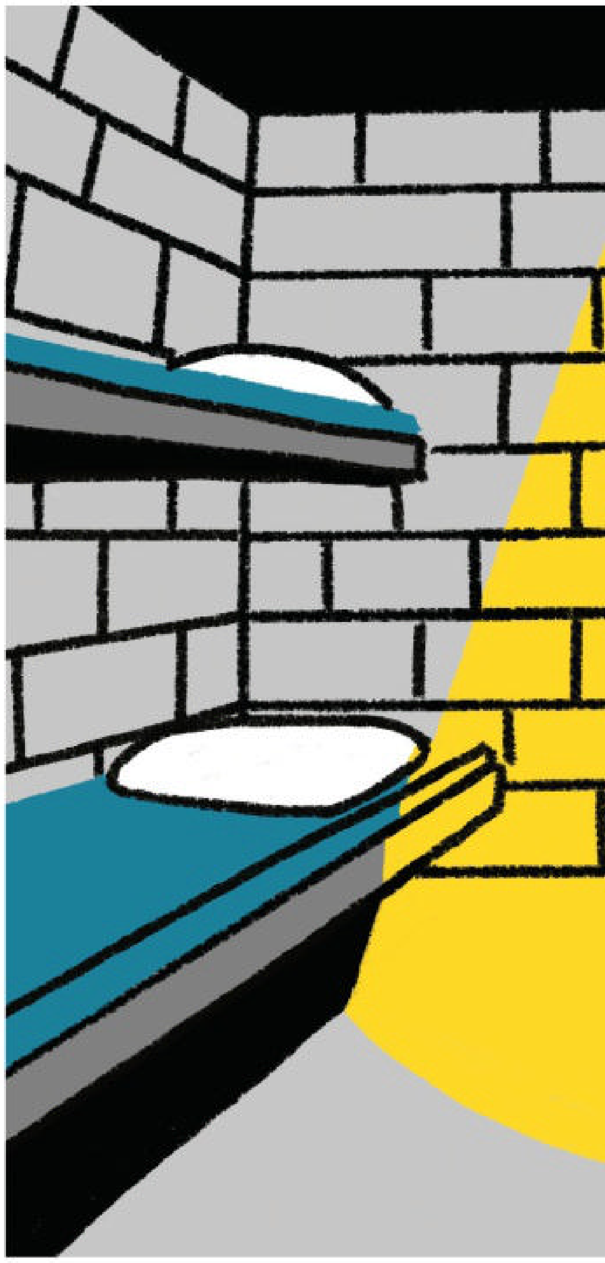
"I'm going through this whole process of putting these restraints on, cheesing ear to ear," he remembers. Headed to Colby, he says, "I don't think I had felt more free in my life." In the classroom, Hylton—a large 32-year-old at 6.5 feet and 275 pounds, with a calming deep voice and a contagious laugh—and Besteman began, as they usually do, by instructing everyone to make a circle with their desks. Only this time, Hylton could hear chairs being dragged. As he saw his students speak, he registered their voices and their position in the room. The escort officers joined in, following instructions from their charge—not the other way around—moving furniture and taking part in the conversation he would lead.

This was all possible because Hylton has long-standing relationships with prison officials and staff, including Randall Liberty, who, as sheriff of Kennebec County, arrested Hylton 14 years ago. Now Maine's commissioner of corrections, he helped clear the way for Hylton's job at Colby despite countless policy hurdles. Liberty, Hylton wrote over email, "has seen me at my worst and is now supporting me in the realization of my best."

Hylton had an abusive father, and, at age 10, cold-called a social worker who ushered him into Maine's foster care system. When a family of Canadian nationals he had bonded with and hoped would adopt him failed to acquire citizenship, "that was it," he remembers. "It was just one separation too many." Soon after, Hylton was diagnosed with emotional detachment disorder and oppositional defiant disorder. "I did not have the capacity, the ability, or the language to be able to wrestle with all the emotion," he says, and his teen years were rife with disconnection and isolation. When he was 16, his latest foster mother had a fatal heart attack while he was on the line with 911. A year later, his biological father died of cancer. At 17, Hylton moved from the coastal town of Belfast to Augusta. Within a month, Hylton participated in a violent home invasion alongside an older foster brother, wielding a machete against a man and his 10-year-old daughter.

In county jail for 22 months, Hylton was placed in segregation, or "seg"—a version of solitary confinement—as his lawyer negotiated a plea deal. Hylton began taking classes, and in 2010, on the day he was sentenced to 50 years behind bars, received his GED.

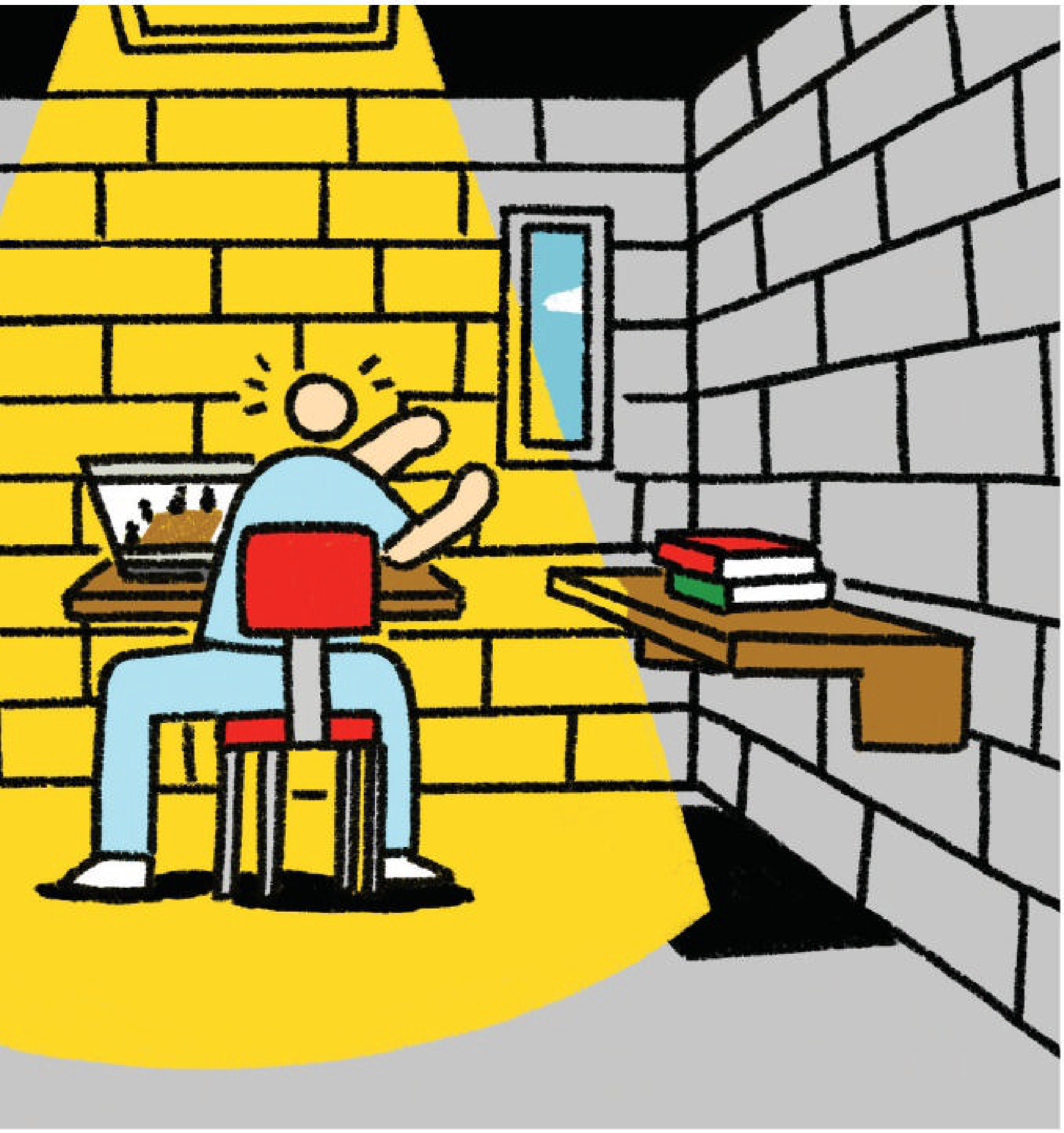
Once inside, Hylton says he leaned into "the hustle," getting into fights and gaining "the reputation of someone unafraid of violence." But that reputation, alongside his trajectory, began to shift radically when he met Ephriam "E" Bennett, who was serving a 27-year sentence.



MONIQUE WRAY

Bennett, a former prizefighter, career military man, and entrepreneur, was almost 30 years older than Hylton and saw potential in him. As an early act of mentorship, one day he dropped a stack of magazines in front of Hylton in the rec yard. "Here," Bennett said, "have something to read." From there, Bennett pushed him to take more courses and enroll in programs for music and creative writing. Hylton eventually got a bachelor's degree from the University of Maine, and, just last year, earned a master's in conflict analysis, with a concentration in social justice advocacy and activism from George Mason University.

Bennett also introduced Hylton to a Christian faith defined by, as Hylton puts it, "the Jesus of the Bible" with whom he could relate: "the callous-handed, darker-skinned, rough around the edges...Jesus, not the blond-haired, blue-eyed European Jesus." Hylton was accepted into the prison's internal hos-



pice program, which aids people who are dying while incarcerated. He has since helped 17 men at the end of their lives, giving baths and keeping them company with stories and songs.

Hylton soon gained respect from fellow residents, staff, and administrators. When prison officials, in step with reformers pushing a reconsideration of solitary confinement, decided to close down the Maine State Prison's own seg ward, Hylton and a handful of fellow residents helped reenvision the space, and then worked together to remodel the cells where he had spent some of his earliest days in prison. Today it is a unit people earn their way into, with a sizable garden that grows food for both the prison's kitchen and outside donation, a library and study rooms, a prison dog grooming facility, and a gym. Besteman, who has taught at Colby for nearly three decades, says Hylton is "fundamental to the reason why that prison is no longer as violent."

Although Hylton is barred from making direct contact with the people he harmed, he has submitted a letter of apology for them to the state; further contact is their choice. He says he subscribes to a philosophy of restorative justice, the idea that rehabilitation happens not through serving time, but by repairing the harm one has caused. He sees his work at Colby, and as a writer, as steps to that end. Aside from running a weekly abolitionist-themed email newsletter, he's contributed around 30 columns to *Mainer* magazine, and published an autobiographical article about trauma and faith-based healing in the journal *Religions.* To Hylton, allowing people like him to teach "creates a means for us to… pay our debt to society."

"I am able to contribute to my community," Hylton says. "And that is one of the deepest, most transformative pieces of this teaching experience."

Besteman first met Hylton in the fall of 2021 while running a statewide arts and education project on ending incarceration. Hylton participated in several related programs, including by helping to gather peers at the prison to participate in a short film on abolition. Finding him to be a "fulcrum between the inside and outside," she arranged for him to speak at a Colby human rights lecture series held on Zoom during the pandemic. Afterward, Besteman put in a request to Colby's provost to let Hylton join her as a co-instructor. "I knew he would be a powerful teacher," she said, "extremely compelling and deeply interested in people."

Their time together offers the barest glimpse of an abolitionist future, when the punishment and separation underlying incarceration are supplanted by programs rooted in community building. A typical class has Hylton teleconferencing on a projected screen while Besteman and 14 students gather in person. They begin by all answering the same question, either simple ("If you were weather right now, what would you be?") or more challenging ("What are you leaving behind to come into class today?"). Students then collectively reflect on weekly readings covering police, prisons, surveillance, the United States' history of slavery and incarceration centers, and, ultimately, alternatives to such systems.

"It's one thing to just read an article about solitary confinement," says Halle Carroll, a Colby senior who took the class. "It's another thing to finish reading and hear Leo talk about his experience and the experience of others."

A month after he journeyed to Colby, all 14 of his students visited Hylton on the prison grounds. After giving them a tour of the facility, Hylton—unchained and free to hug them, unlike when he visited them on campus—took everyone to what he calls "his spot": the only hill that lets you see beyond the fence to take in the mountains. "We all stood there," Carroll recalls, "and shared a word to describe what this day meant to us." At 4:30 p.m., Carroll and her classmates filed out of the prison's gates to head back to campus. Hylton stayed inside. ***—Abigail Glasgow***

PEOPLE'S CHOICE

THE CLOSER

Can red-state voters be persuaded to protect abortion? This organizer has done it twice.

RACHEL SWEET CAN'T pinpoint a specific moment or life experience that inspired her to pursue a career fighting for reproductive rights. As a 31-year-old woman, she had always had the right to choose. She grew up in a Kansas City, Missouri, suburb, as part of a politically engaged family that often talked about liberal values. In college, she interned at Planned Parenthood. After graduating, she joined the policy team for Kansas City's mayor, and part of her work focused on public health issues.

"I don't have a good story," Sweet says. "I have never been pregnant. I've never had an abortion. I just *know* lots of people who have had abortions, and I love and care about them."

She also knows how to win. In 2022, she defeated two anti-abortion ballot measures in traditionally red states—first as the campaign manager of the group credited with successfully toppling an August referendum in Kansas, and second in Kentucky, where she similarly defeated another ballot measure in November.

These victories not only served as an emotional salve to widespread anguish among pro-choice Americans after the Supreme Court's *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* decision, but now stand as a guide for abortion rights organizers fighting right-wing politicians and conservative courts in red states.

The Kansas measure had been put on the ballot long before *Dobbs* gutted *Roe v. Wade* and shifted the power of regulating the medical procedure to individual states, making it the earliest test of how the issue would play with voters newly charged with such decisions.

Kansas was an unlikely place to expect a resounding affirmation of the right to an abortion. The state has played host to some of America's most intense anti-choice activism. During the 1991 "Summer of Mercy," advocates flocked there to protest reproductive rights, and some 2,600 demonstrators were arrested, mostly for blocking clinic access and harassing patients and staff. Later, in 2009, George Tiller, a physician who performed abortions in Wichita, was murdered by an anti-abortion extremist. In 2015, Kansas became the first state to ban dilation and evacuation, the abortion method that is the standard of care after the first trimester.

In 2019, the state's Supreme Court overruled that ban, declaring for the first time that a Kansas Bill of Rights clause protecting "equal and inalienable natural rights" includes the rights "of personal autonomy" and to "control one's own body." Conservative lawmakers responded in 2021 by drafting a constitutional amendment that, if adopted by voters, would have effectively negated the court's decision by amending the constitution to assert that nothing in the document guaranteed abortion rights.

The premise of the ballot referendum was, as a technical matter, straightforward. Kansans were to consider whether to add language to their state's constitution that would bar other parts of the document from being interpreted to protect a right to abortion. But the wording of the measure seemed designed to deceive. "An average voter could reasonably think that this amendment will [merely]

WHITNEY CURTIS

eliminate state funding of abortion," Wichita State University political science professor Neal Allen told *Mother Jones* at the time, "but there is no state funding for abortion in Kansas." In reality, if it passed, the referendum would have freed legislators to enact a total abortion ban, with zero exceptions, that could not be challenged in state courts.

Pro-choice activists were also concerned about the ballot measure's timing. When Republican legislators scheduled the referendum for an August 2022 primary election, rather than the November general election, they seemed to be banking on fewer voters showing up. "If you really want to let the voters of Kansas make this decision, and let their voices be heard, why don't we do this at a time when more people vote?" Sweet said, summarizing her side's argument that "was flatly rejected by conservatives in the Kansas legislature."

But in retrospect, the August timing gave reproductive rights advocates across America a place to channel their post-*Dobbs* outrage—and dollars. Donations from all over the country poured into Kansans for Reproductive Freedom—a bipartisan consortium of reproductive rights advocates and organizations founded to defeat the ballot measure. Sweet was responsible for managing the budget, raising money, meeting with community members, and overseeing strategy. A pivotal move was supercharging the group's canvassing efforts, building a doorstep campaign that was key to explaining the ballot's confusing language and high stakes.

One of her canvassers was a guy named Ted, who volunteered to knock on doors in rural Kansas on a 100-degree day. In a combination hair salon and pilates studio that the group had borrowed for organizing efforts, Ted, a rugged man in cargo shorts and a baseball cap, stood out among a sea of women. Sweet approached him and asked why he wanted to fight for reproductive rights, as someone who presumably had never had an abortion, nor would ever need one.

He explained that he loves his three young daughters, and one day one of them might require abortion care. "It is not enough for me to say that I am an ally and that I will protect them," he told Sweet. "I have to actually *do* something about it."

More than 4,000 people volunteered to canvass or do other get-out-the-vote efforts, according to Sweet. Their work helped procure record turnout for an August election; primaries typically draw 20 to 25 percent of voters, but more than 46 percent came out in 2022.

On election night, Sweet and her team had felt confident that more Kansans agreed with their cause than did not, but they had not anticipated the emphatic 59–41 margin of victory. They broke out champagne.

With victory secured and November months away, Sweet was free to take up the fight wherever it next went. On August 15, just two weeks after the Kansas primary, Sweet started her new job as the campaign manager of Protect Kentucky Access, another single-issue organization founded to defend abortion rights. She began work remotely—a concession her new bosses granted so she could "get my life in order"—and within a few weeks, packed up her Ford SUV to make the 8-hour drive to Louisville.

One challenge was that more of Kentucky's population lives in rural areas, which made door-to-door organizing and canvassing more difficult. But the biggest hurdle facing Sweet in her new job was money—or lack of it. When she joined Protect Kentucky Access, the team had raised roughly $1.7 million. "I saw that number and thought, 'We've got a lot of work to do,'" Sweet recalls. After setting out a plan to boost grassroots donations and mimic the fundraising success they'd had in Kansas, Sweet says they raised about $6.3 million by the end of the campaign.

Although the conservative lawmakers who crafted both initiatives had similar goals, Kentucky's abortion landscape was even more restrictive. Abortion was legal in Kansas through 21 weeks' gestation, under the state Supreme Court's 2019 decision, and the amendment's failure left that window intact. But in Kentucky, *Dobbs* had kicked off a trigger law banning abortion in almost all cases, including rape and incest, with exceptions only to save the life of a mother or prevent debilitating injury. Kentucky's Supreme Court allowed it to go into effect, as it considers whether the state constitution protects any right to abortion.

So in November, when Kentucky voters rejected the amendment by a 52–48 margin, they voted to keep language out of their state constitution that would have explicitly stated the document creates no right to abortion and short-circuited the court's deliberations. But Sweet's victory did nothing to further abortion access in Kentucky at a moment the state awaits the judges' final decision.

Even if the Kentucky Supreme Court ultimately upholds the trigger law, Sweet says the work will still have been worthwhile. "It will always be on the books that Kentuckians voted to protect the right to abortion," she says. "If the court ignores that and if the politicians ignore that, so be it. But Kentuckians made their voices heard."

After all, the fight for reproductive rights was never going to end on November 8. "The anti-choice movement took 50 years to overturn *Roe v. Wade*," she says. "I don't think it is going to take 50 years for us to restore access to abortion in large swaths of this country, but it is going to take more than one or two cycles."

Sweet's record, alongside a marquee victory in battleground Michigan and blue state wins in Vermont and California, proved that the ballot initiatives will be a valuable weapon as pro-choicers take on that fight. Already, abortion rights advocates across a range of red-leaning states—Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, and South Dakota—are discussing measures for upcoming elections.

Sweet wants them to know she is more than willing to chat. "I have been talking to people who are working on these ballot measures in a couple of states," she says, "because I think some of the lessons learned in Kansas and Kentucky can benefit everyone."

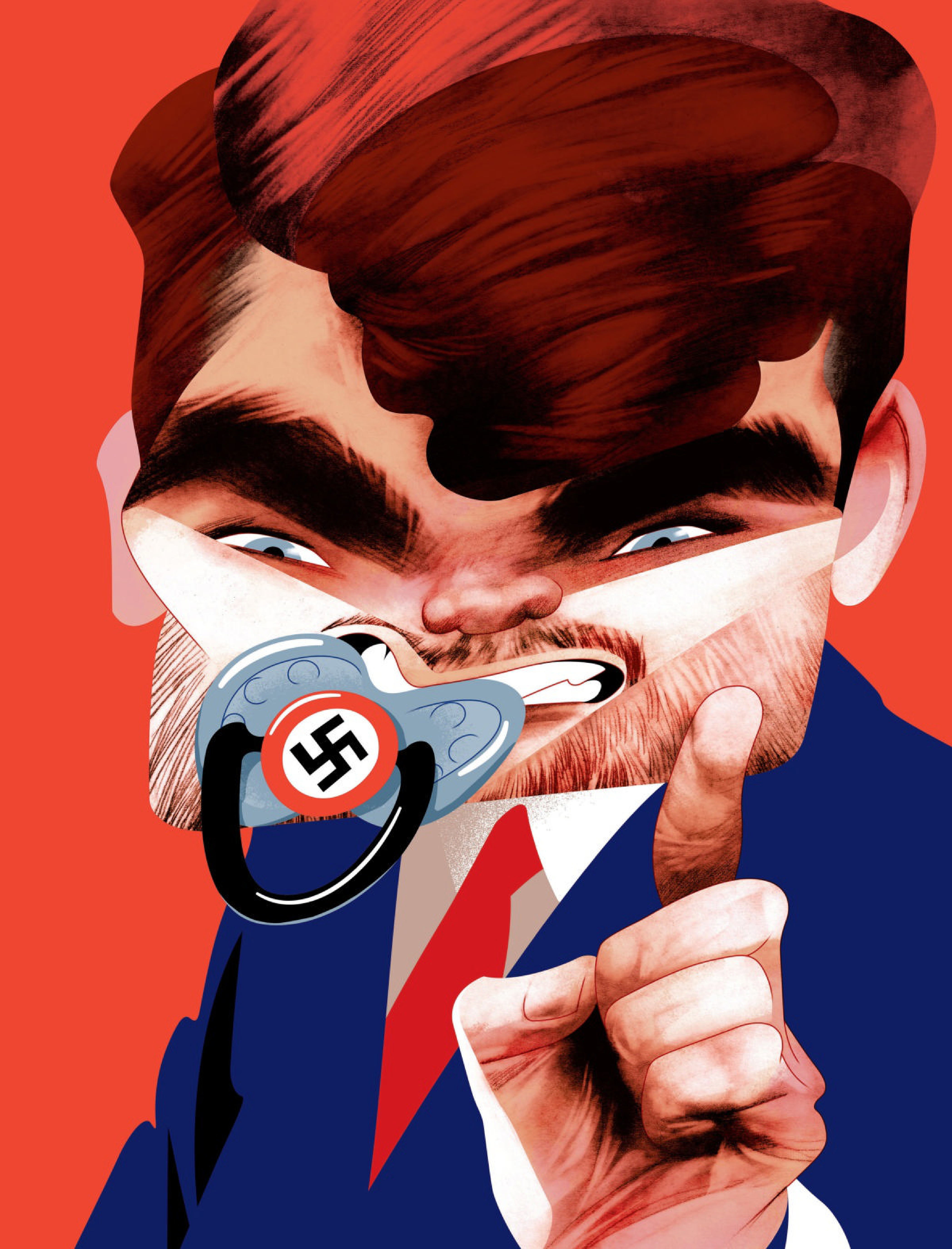
—Abby Vesoulis

How Nick Fuentes' white nationalist broadcasts summoned a new generation of GOP hate

STREAM OF NOXIOUSNESS

BY ALI BRELAND

ILLUSTRATIONS BY ANDRÉ CARRILHO



EIGHT MONTHS BEFORE

the white nationalist figure Nicholas J. Fuentes ignited a political firestorm by dining with Kanye West and Donald Trump at Mar-a-Lago, he strode out onstage to a crowd of what he claimed were 1,000 followers, chanting "America First." Behind a podium, flanked by two American flags and one with that slogan, he hit his standard beats (the nation is in decline, Christ is king) while sprinkling in some extremely troubling riffs, like comparing Vladimir Putin to Hitler—and suggesting the similarity was a "good thing."

This Marriott conference center worth of Groypers—which Fuentes' fans call themselves in homage to a right-wing internet frog meme—had gathered in Orlando for the third annual America First Political Action Conference. He was serving as the warmup act for a secret guest of honor: Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-Ga.). She didn't say anything too noteworthy, but her willingness to appear at an event hosted by an openly racist Holocaust denier was a massive victory for his cause. In becoming a member of Congress, Greene had helped bring institutional credibility to fringe and racist conspiracy theories. Now she was doing the same for his brand of white nationalism.

"It was a big deal for her to come out and do that," Fuentes said, praising Greene after her keynote. "You guys know full well the risk—she put herself out on a limb tonight and we here at AFPAC are grateful."

"At AFPAC 1 I famously said it would be a small group of highly motivated people who would change the world," he added. "Here in Orlando, I say we *are* that group of people… We are going to rule this country."

The event's evolution suggests he's made progress toward that goal. The first one, in February 2020, had no politicians, instead featuring far-right commentator Michelle Malkin and Patrick Casey, a longtime member and leader of the neo-Nazi group Identity Evropa. By 2022, six Republican elected officials spoke, including Greene and Rep. Paul Gosar (R-Ariz.). They appeared alongside explicit white power activists, including Vincent James, a supremacist influencer who used his speaking slot to argue that crime wouldn't go down until even more Black Americans were in prison; Peter Brimelow, who founded the white supremacist website VDare; and Jared Taylor, founder of *American Renaissance*, a racist journal.

The logistics of the Orlando conference, like the previous ones, were also designed to accelerate the GOP's slide toward white nationalism: It was just a 15-minute drive from where the Conservative Political Action Conference, which for decades has drawn the party's biggest names and thousands of attendees, was taking place the same day. AFPAC started at 9 p.m., after CPAC wrapped, so participants could attend both.

In the latter half of the 20th century, the GOP was pushed right by radio provocateurs like Rush Limbaugh and Fuentes' hero Pat Buchanan—people who never held elected office but were deeply influential to a radicalizing party and a portent of its Trumpified future. Today, this 24-year-old digital native is doing the same. "My job," Fuentes explained in a May 2021 livestream, "is to keep pushing things further. We, because nobody else will, need to push the envelope. We're going to get called racist, sexist, anti-Semitic, bigoted, whatever. When the party is where we are two years later, we're not going to get the credit for the ideas that become popular. But that's okay…We are the right-wing flank of the Republican Party."

I saw how Fuentes makes his pitch on a chilly, damp day in November 2021, when he hosted a rally in front of Gracie Mansion, the official residence of New York City's mayor. A throng of about 100 intently watched as Fuentes waved a crucifix and railed against local Covid restrictions.

One of Fuentes' talents is pivoting from any topic to his central beliefs. "It's not even just about the pandemic," he exhorted. "Take a look at this city for the past year, ever since George Floyd died…Just like every city in America, the crime is out of control!" Anger over public health measures provided a way to launder more extreme and racist positions—and to tap into his audience's fears of being left behind.

The crowd—mostly white, male, and under 30—cheered. A handful waved flags, and others, in the organization's riff on red MAGA hats, wore blue caps reading "America First." (The slogan, popularized by Woodrow Wilson, was adopted by Buchanan and then by Trump and Fuentes.) "Our quality of life is being destroyed…They want us to live in smaller houses. They want us to eat less food, take up less space, have less health care, have fewer children. And they want us to eat crickets," Fuentes said, egged on by supportive boos. "I'm not eating any bugs!"

From Father Coughlin to Donald Trump, demagogues have long commingled racist and anti-Semitic appeals with fears of economic decline. Fuentes' power comes from layering on a generational critique that taps into young people's apprehension that their prospects are dimming. Decades of wage stagnation, growing income inequality, a housing crisis, and productivity gains flowing mostly to upper management and investors have all led Gen Z to question capitalism. The ranks of democratic socialists have grown as a result, but not every young person is drawn to the left.

Fuentes is one of a few figures on the right who directly speak to new generations anxious about the decline of the middle class and wondering what to do about it. By combining class and economic precarity with white nationalism, Fuentes makes racism even more persuasive to a certain kind of person. This brew has helped fuel his meteoric rise from fringe YouTube star to Mar-a-Lago guest, becoming heir apparent to the American white nationalist throne.

Fuentes is known for his charisma. Unlike some of his right-wing internet peers, like Ben Shapiro and Tim Pool, who speak in monotones and try their hardest to present as intellectuals, Fuentes prefers to grandstand while working to provoke and engage. Another major component of Fuentes' appeal is that he provides logically consistent, albeit atrocious, answers to the contradictions of modern conservatism. His arguments have a way of ripping open muddled beliefs advanced by mainstream conservatives.

Take their grievance against "woke capitalism"—which really means businesses responding to consumer expectations in a manner that bolsters the bottom line—a complaint that flies in the face of the free-market worship that is core to mainstream figures on the right. Fuentes circumvents this contradiction by just never defending capitalism. Unlike many elected Republicans, he does not argue against diversity while claiming he isn't racist—he openly argues diversity is bad because of his belief in the inferiority of nonwhite races. The list goes on. If there is a right-wing belief that involves obfuscating an unsavory motivation, Fuentes is open about it. He speaks to the people who don't mind saying everything out loud.

> "My job is to keep pushing things further. **We're going to get called racist, sexist, anti-Semitic, bigoted, whatever.** But that's okay."

NICK FUENTES GREW UP in the relative comfort and stability of a two-parent household in the Chicago suburb of La Grange. He has said that his father, Bill Fuentes, a vice president at a ball bearing manufacturer, is half-Mexican, which Nick sometimes uses to claim he's not a white supremacist—and sometimes brushes off as distant lineage irrelevant after decades of assimilation. His parents supported Nick as he broadcast racist livestreams from their basement. In one, he said that, growing up, his family avoided Applebee's and Red Lobster because they were "commonly known as Black fare," adding that they shared a saying about Olive Garden that contained the n-word. In December 2021, his mother phoned in to his show to speculate on the race of a man who'd opened fire in a mall near her home. "What flavor do you think that shooting was?" Lauren Fuentes asked. "You know what I mean." Before hanging up, in a laughing moment, she insisted Nick had learned anti-Black prejudice "from your dad."

Nick entered high school in 2012, where he assembled a roster of activities that suggest a lust for attention and budding oratorical skills. He joined the speech team and Model UN, got elected student body president, and was selected to greet Illinois' governor during a school visit. Fuentes hosted a campus TV and radio talk show where he discussed his conservative politics—he was "more moderate" then, he would later admit, sometimes describing himself as a former libertarian. Bill Allan, who taught Fuentes and ran the school's television programs, told the *Chicago Tribune* in 2017 that "none of the stuff he produced was even close to the level he's at now."

The libertarian-to-fascist pathway is well documented, and the seeds of what his politics would become were already present. In a blog post from just after his high school graduation, 17-year-old Fuentes harbors a pessimistic outlook that would lead him to forsake free markets: "My timely birth allowed me to watch on the nightly news the spoils of the American experiment squandered for one final time before the dying gasp of a once exceptional people as the free world and economic abundance of Ronald Reagan was inherited by the lizard people...My generation is the generation of hopelessness." In a foreshadowing of his turn to Christian theocracy, he promised "to promulgate and preach the good word of the American restoration."

In that same post, written the day before Trump was formally nominated as the Republicans' 2016 candidate, Fuentes described his ascent as an opportunity. "Donald Trump has created an opening, we don't know for how long and we don't know if it's big enough, but [it is] an opportunity for the American people to throw off the yolk [*sic*] of the new age orthodoxy which has enslaved us."

Fuentes eventually deleted his blog, and began the livestreams that would make him a far-right star from his parents' home. After enrolling at Boston University, he would broadcast nightly from the dorms. He grew more radical and established a campus reputation as an Islamophobic Trump supporter. He claimed persecution, likening the grief students gave him for wearing a MAGA hat to being discriminated against for being Black or wearing a hijab. When campus conservatives tapped him for an election debate against BU's student president, Fuentes seized every opportunity to antagonize the audience. After claiming that "multiculturalism is a cancer" and trolling the crowd as "godless hippies," Fuentes admitted to a student journalist that "it wouldn't be fun if it wasn't ugly." After Trump took office, he told the *Boston Globe* that "Trump is a rocket ship...And everyone is trying to attach themselves to it."

While there's little record of his actions that weekend, Fuentes attended the August 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, where Confederate flags and torches were hoisted by neofascists, neo-Nazis, white supremacists, militia members, and other far-right demonstrators—one of whom killed Heather Heyer, a counterprotester, by running her over. A few months before, Fuentes had just 2,000 followers on Twitter. But back on his own campus, he said he faced death threats from other students over his presence in Charlottesville. BU security didn't respond to a request for comment on his claim, but contemporaneous press coverage repeating it raised his profile. By October, he had amassed 12,000 Twitter followers.

The rally proved to be the terminus point for key figures on the alt-right, leaving prominent white nationalists like Richard Spencer and James Allsup either tied up in litigation or too toxic to generate mass appeal. But it was one of the most important moments in Fuentes' ascent, helping elevate him just as openings emerged among the fascist-in-a-suit set that he would one day take over. He dropped out of BU days after the rally, citing harassment. But the move had the benefit of freeing him to try his hand as a full-time political influencer. "'Why don't you give me just one year to explore this?'" Nick recalled telling his parents in a BBC documentary. "'If it works out, I'll keep doing it. If it doesn't work out, I'll abandon it.'...And it worked out."

In his streams, Fuentes seldom mentions intellectual influences, preferring to parse the news and grievances of the moment. While he's praised Brimelow and Taylor, both in their 70s, he's most enthusiastic about 84-year-old Pat Buchanan. In 2018, on the far-right former presidential candidate's birthday, Fuentes dedicated 45 minutes of praise to the "fantastic guy." Clad in a plaid button-down and blazer, he hailed Buchanan's books, including *Suicide of a Superpower* and *Death of the West*. But Fuentes was particularly excited by a syndicated column Buchanan wrote after Charlottesville, waving what he claimed was a signed copy given to him by a friend.

Buchanan's piece praises the exploits of Western explorers, endorses their self-conception as "white supremacists" who disregarded the people they encountered and believed "European Man had the right to rule the world," and embraces their vision of a racial hierarchy. "'All men are equal' is an ideological statement. Where is the scientific proof for it?" Fuentes read. "You can't beat that!" he exclaimed. "When he says something like that, I say, 'Okay, it's not unpatriotic to believe this stuff. It's not nonconservative, neo-Nazi stuff. It's totally legit.'"

"There's dumb-guy alt-right stuff and then people who consider themselves conservative intellectuals," says Joshua Citarella, an artist and internet culture researcher who closely observed Fuentes' ascent. "He was able to bridge the two." For the next several years, Fuentes mostly straddled these worlds, appealing to online extremists who craved edginess while also seeking mainstream respectability. He took steps to distance himself from white nationalism and tried to hide his most racist beliefs. But after he was banned from Twitter in July 2021, he lost discipline. That November, after Kyle Rittenhouse was acquitted of killing two people amid racial-justice demonstrations in Wisconsin, Fuentes openly admitted to being racist. Two months later, he used the n-word while streaming. By then, whatever game he'd been trying to play had ended.

IN 2019, FUENTES encouraged his fans to swarm political events featuring Donald Trump Jr., Rep. Dan Crenshaw (R-Texas), and Charlie Kirk, whose Turning Point USA student organization brought them and similar speakers to college campuses. Fuentes and his followers dubbed it the Groyper Wars, as they commandeered the Q&A portions of events to draw attention and gain recruits, while bullying Kirk and the like to move further to the right. Crenshaw's response was unsparing: "I fucking hate Nick Fuentes," he later told CNN. "He's one of the worst human beings I've ever come across."

But Kirk has since moved to the right. Last April, he tweeted that there "is an undeniable War on White People in The West," a position he had previously overtly rejected. Fuentes declared victory, crowing on Telegram that the tweet was "a testament to how thoroughly Groypers have taken over the conversation."

Like most political figures, Fuentes is prone to hyperbole, but the boast has a grain of truth. Since Fuentes came on the scene, prevailing right-wing attitudes have become more openly vitriolic toward LGBTQ people, and versions of the "white replacement" conspiracy theory have proliferated. That may have been inevitable, given the party's long-standing trajectory and its embrace of Trump, but Fuentes played a part in generating energy around such positions and demonstrating to GOP gatekeepers that they would play with a new generation.

> **I fucking hate Nick Fuentes.** He's one of the worst human beings I've ever come across.

Through rooting around on social media and local news reports, I was able to find 30-some colleges, from Dartmouth to Old Dominion, where campus conservative or Republican organizations have been taken over by America First–styled groups. The groups' exact orientation toward Fuentes can be unclear, but they all show varying degrees of sympathy to his brand of politics. At least 25 of those schools show up on a list maintained by something called the College Republican Patriot Coalition, whose website says "one of the primary challenges facing America is the gradual loss of its moral character," and that it is "impossible to disentangle Christianity not only from American identity, but from Western civilization itself." Simon Dickerman, a videographer, techie, and former Fuentes employee, has said the coalition is secretly run by Fuentes and America First.

Fuentes' following and impact are hard to precisely measure. Former allies have alleged the numbers are juiced, but counters on his streams have regularly shown five-figure live audiences. Before he was finally banned from Twitter, Fuentes had nearly 140,000 followers; his Telegram now has more than 50,000.

"Nick Fuentes did not single-handedly cause these shifts in the Republican Party and in conservatism. He was in the right place at the right time," says Ben Lorber, an analyst with the far-right watchdog group Political Research Associates. "I wouldn't discount his influence, though, in helping craft a Gen Z conservative counterculture"—one that Lorber says is gaining sway as younger people are hired by lawmakers and work their way up the party. "They might not be writing the GOP national convention speeches and platforms, or leading the Heritage Foundation," he says, "but they might be interns and young staffers."

Fuentes, who declined to comment for this article, looked set to exit Trump's presidency with the wind at his back. He still had his Twitter account, and seemed to maintain ties with the broader conservative apparatus. But his actions on January 6, 2021, risked everything he had built, and threatened to leave him marooned, as Charlottesville did to Richard Spencer three years before. Video footage circulated of Fuentes, yet again in a suit and tie, standing on the steps of the Capitol yelling into a megaphone encouraging people to "keep moving towards" the building and to "break down the barriers and disregard the police." He would be subpoenaed and interviewed by the House January 6 committee, and the FBI reportedly investigated why he had received $250,000 worth of bitcoin in the days before the riot.

"WE'RE GONNA GET to the truth tonight about Nick's sussy baka behavior," said a giddy, baby-faced young man wearing a Hawaiian shirt, Harry Potter–like glasses, and a microphone headset, sitting in front of a tapestry of playing cards. Sussy baka is an internet term for "suspicious idiot," and would be used repeatedly in the ensuing hours. The giddy man, a far-right podcaster and streamer who goes by PPP, was minutes away from hosting Jaden McNeil, Fuentes' former right-hand man.

McNeil had started a successful Turning Point USA chapter at Kansas State University and eventually trekked to CPAC, where he says he met Fuentes. (Although Fuentes was barred from attending the conference in 2019, he established a tradition of speaking at nearby venues and sometimes hanging around outside CPAC's doors.) Back home, McNeil started watching Fuentes and ultimately decided to drop out of school, move into Fuentes' basement, and work full-time for America First.

But by the time he joined PPP's stream in May 2022, McNeil had become a defector ready to detail their falling-out on livestream, and eager to paint a picture of a mercurial, petulant, and venal leader losing control of his acolytes. McNeil complained that he and other followers had been "brainwashed" and told stories suggesting Fuentes was not as committed to Catholicism as his public persona indicates. "Nick would compare himself to Christ," Dickerman complained, and McNeil said he hardly ever attended Mass: "I can count on one hand the amount of times that I know he went."

The two discussed a half-dozen or so former associates who'd also left, and griped that interns and staff had been underpaid or stiffed on promised pay. (In 2020, extremism researcher Megan Squire found Fuentes was pulling in more than $100,000 annually by broadcasting on DLive. Though he was kicked off that platform, he still collects money from his proprietary streaming service, sells merch, and accepts donations.) "He's a sick person who sees no problem destroying young white men's lives," McNeil added, recounting Fuentes' promise to "rape him in legal fees." To top off their scorched-earth campaign, they speculated that, after January 6, Fuentes had become an FBI informant and insinuated that he was gay. "For some reason," McNeil said, the fact that he himself dated women had "always been a weird issue with Nick." (For more on Fuentes' appeal to incels, see "Never Been Kissed," page 20.)

Observers wondered if followers were stepping away from Fuentes' extreme brand of white nationalism. But McNeil and Dickerman weren't manifesting disillusionment with the broader political project. Early in the stream, McNeil said Fuentes' positions were "the truth," and when Dickerman criticized Fuentes for praising Hitler, all he had to say was that it wasn't a "winning strategy." Instead, they were mad their old boss seemed too maniacal or distracted to properly carry the mantle for white Christian nationalists.

Between the defections and complications from January 6, Fuentes seemed at a low point. But this past November, he thought he had managed to find a way out of his problems through two other guys who were also going through it: Ye and Donald Trump.

After Kanye West began openly trafficking in anti-Semitism—and losing lucrative endorsements—Fuentes says he was asked to run Ye's ostensible 2024 presidential campaign. Fuentes has described West's reaching out as a lifeline. "I was doing well in 2020, and after January 6, I lost it all," he lamented in a November 26 stream just after having dinner with Trump and Ye. "My income went to zero overnight. My best friends betrayed me. I was put on a no-fly list. It really looked like it was over," Fuentes went on. "Now it looks like we're finally seeing the light at the end of the tunnel," he added with a smile.

Fuentes might have first felt a glow after he and Ye broke bread with Trump at Mar-a-Lago, but it immediately became a harsh national spotlight. Even though Trump appeared to be in a funk, his star power on the wane after many candidates he'd backed lost in November's midterms, the dinner became the country's No. 1 political news story. Elected Republicans slammed Fuentes—while attempting to absolve the former president of any fault. Even Marjorie Taylor Greene joined in, claiming she condemned "his racist, anti-semitic ideology," knocking the guy whose conference she'd not long ago headlined as an "immature young man."

If extremist members of Congress like Greene are no longer willing to openly associate with Fuentes, there are other groups gladly taking advantage of the ideological space he helped create. The American Populist Union was founded in 2021, filling in a gap Fuentes left as he became more overtly extreme and bigoted. While the organization worked to distance itself from Fuentes personally, according to Amanda Moore, a leftist activist who spent almost a year infiltrating the alt-right, "APU was full of Groypers. They're what Nick Fuentes was." At the group's events, she says she saw members wear blue America First hats and joke he was "their favorite Mexican." In July 2022, the organization rebranded as American Virtue, likely, according to an analysis Lorber wrote for Political Research Associates, as part of another step in its campaign to achieve "mainstream conservative respectability" and "obscure its widespread association with the Groypers."

Moore witnessed a similar dynamic with Republicans for National Renewal, which she describes as "the mid 30s, late 20s version of APU and the Groypers." RNR's grassroots director, Shane Trejo, is a local Michigan GOP official who used to host a podcast called *Blood Soil and Liberty* with a member of Identity Evropa. Like Fuentes, RNR has cultivated links with GOP legislators and candidates, most notably claiming to have worked with members of Congress on a failed push to create an America First Caucus that would have featured Gosar, Greene, Texas' Louie Gohmert, and Alabama's Barry Moore. *Punchbowl News*, the first to report on the effort in April 2021, described their planning documents as some of the "most nativist stuff we've seen." Moore recorded Mark Ivanyo, RNR's executive director, telling a CPAC audience two months before the *Punchbowl* story to "look forward to the America First Caucus," saying it had "been a pleasure" to cooperate with Greene and Gosar on the project. A deleted RNR tweet claimed one of the group's leaders had helped draft the caucus platform.

Fuentes' charisma and antics have helped him build a personal following. But these developments suggest there will be an America First movement whether or not Fuentes is at the helm, because he has accurately located contemporary problems reshaping youth politics: An increasingly geriatric cohort of political leaders has not adapted to a changed world with fewer opportunities for young people. The buttons Fuentes wants to press in response are often fascistic, racist, and immoral. They are also frequently based on specious premises. But they raise the issue of building a better future for certain young people in a way that can resonate among them.

At the end of November, in a livestream after his dinner with Trump, Fuentes announced he would go on a slight hiatus from his nightly videos. Before closing his opening monologue, he paused to gather his thoughts.

"The last thing I'll say is this: We really are at a crossroads here," he said, looking straight into the camera. "It's drag queens in school. It's 18-year-olds joining OnlyFans. It's the filth on TikTok. It's this country not having a border. It's the idea that our kids and this generation is never going to own anything. Debt slavery. Never owning a house, never owning a car, never paying off their school. Never making an income to support a family. Not being able to have a family," Fuentes said, seamlessly blending the fears of a culture war with facts about economic precarity. "The future is so bleak. But that has changed the calculation," he added. "There is nothing to lose." ■

NEVER BEEN KISSED

Meet the incel Fuentes fans who love him for hating women.

BY KRISTEN DOERER

IN OCTOBER 2021, Nick Fuentes launched his own streaming platform, Cozy.tv. After being kicked off every major communications service, from YouTube to Twitter, he promised it would be censorship-free—and explicitly bigoted. "We are anti-gay, anti-woman, anti-Black, anti-Semitic," he boasted in one of his videos a couple months later.

Fuentes' base has always mostly been made of young white men who believe they have lost their rightful place in the United States. He weaponizes their insecurities, as Amanda Marcotte wrote in *Salon*, "convincing them that the cure for the entirely normal mix of emotions they're feeling can be found in embracing a fascist movement."

Racism and misogyny cross-pollinate in the chatrooms that accompany Fuentes' broadcasts. As always, the n-word litters his fans' conversation, but, more and more, so do anti-women slurs like "foid" and "holes." That trend has unfolded as Fuentes seems to have made more of a point over the past year of reaching receptive men by bashing women, in part by personally identifying with the "incel" subculture. The term is short for "involuntary celibate," and has become inextricably associated with misogynist men who not only blame women for their problems, but believe women owe them sex.

Fuentes claims to understand them because he *is* one of them. "I'm an incel, I'm a proud incel," he boasted on a stream in January 2022. Since then, he has regularly painted women as inferior, irrational, and thus deserving of the violent fantasies that incels can harbor. With misogyny taking a more central place in his America First movement, it is now being braided with his white nationalism and authoritarian tendencies, and his political aspirations to build a nation where women, LGBTQ people, Jews, and people of color would be absent or under the boot.

Incels and other radical misogynists believe "that women hold social, economic, political power over men, and that has been made worse through feminism," says Megan Kelly, a PhD student at the University of Basel and a co-founder of the Institute for Research on Male Supremacism. Incels blame society for their celibacy. The solutions they push would reestablish patriarchal norms by walking back women's right to vote or divorce. Some talk about the creation of "government-mandated girlfriends." Others call for the murder of women—whether for denying them sex or for being "sluts"—and celebrate killers like Elliot Rodger, who murdered six people in 2014 while targeting a University of California, Santa Barbara, sorority.

Kelly says incels have a point of view that reflects "incredibly racist understandings of the world" and that has helped make their communities fertile ground for Fuentes. In these spaces, Asian women are often referred to as "noodlewhores" and Black people as "chimps" or the n-word. Jews are blamed for producing and profiting off porn while advancing "race-mixing." Incels'

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conversations frequently debase Black women and refer to them as animals. Their discussions often applaud men who hit or kill women—especially if that violence was committed by a Black man. Such incidents offer a two-for-one sadistic thrill by actualizing incels' brutal anti-women fantasies while also buttressing their bigoted belief that Black men are prone to aggression.

"When a bitch going crazy—sometimes you have got to grab her...Sometimes you got to control yo' bitch. Listen, I would defer to Blacks on this. They've got it figured out," Fuentes said on a Cozy.tv stream in February 2022. He praised a former Baltimore Ravens running back who was caught on tape in 2014 knocking his fiancée unconscious in an elevator. "Dude, when Ray Rice punched that girl, that was hilarious," Fuentes said, cracking a smile.

He held back laughter, recalling a different instance of a Black celebrity committing domestic violence. "Remember when Chris Brown beat up Rihanna?" Fuentes continued. "I supported that."

The following month, Fuentes spied another chance to court incels, when Secret Service threat assessment analysts released a report on misogynist extremism. It gave details of a 2018 attack in which a man shot six women, killing two, at a Tallahassee yoga studio before turning the gun on himself. The report said that the gunman was enamored with Hitler and the Aryan Nation, and that his YouTube videos described an intense hatred of women—especially those who date Black men.

Incel message boards lit up discussing the study, and within days, Fuentes brought it to his livestream. While Fuentes took care to say that he himself wasn't violent, he made it clear he identified with the shooter's ideology. Fuentes said the government analysts were right to fear similar violence from incels. "When you get a community of guys with nothing left to lose...if they're incels, it's high test"—meaning high testosterone—"it's aggressive," said Fuentes. "They know what the consequences of that will be." His tone seemed designed to reassure disaffected men that their grievances are legitimate, and that it wouldn't be fair to fault them if they sought retribution.

When South Korea narrowly elected a new conservative president last year, online misogynists embraced Yoon Sukyeol as "the incel president." It didn't matter that Yoon is a married man; they were excited by his campaign platform calling for the abolishment of South Korea's Ministry of Gender Equality and Family and his promise to protect men from the #MeToo movement.

To Fuentes, Yoon's win was proof positive that it is possible to sell "an incel platform and only appeal to men" while still gaining a massive, mainstream, and election-winning following. "The future is to lean in, lean into these primordial cleavages, men versus women, the race stuff," Fuentes said on his livestream shortly after South Korea's election. "We represent the disaffected male."

Fuentes then launched into what sounded like a stump speech, outlining the world he wants to create with his followers' help. "Why don't we take the message to the men and say, 'Hey men, hey men, vote for me, I'll destroy feminism'?" he said, plotting ways to "make it harder for women to become whores" and "to incentivize women to be in monogamous marriages for the long term and to have and raise kids."

That dark fantasy clearly draws on historical visions of the family favored by fundamentalists, and is one that dovetails with views Fuentes has expressed on his show about Christianity's rightful role in society. As extremism researcher Kyle Mantyla puts it, "If they can impose Christian nationalism on this country, that will also solve their incel

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THE WEBSITE FROM HELL

> THE TROLLS
> WHO HOUNDED
> PEOPLE TO KILL
> THEMSELVES
> CREATED THE
> ONLINE CULTURE
> WE HAVE TODAY.

BY ALI BRELAND

ILLUSTRATIONS BY
MARVIN CANDLE

Most websites aren't known for having a "kill count." Kiwi Farms is. Its victims reportedly include Julie Terryberry, who in 2016 took her life after being targeted by users of the site. Two years later, after years of harassment from Kiwi Farms trolls, Chloe Sagal lit herself on fire in a public park. In June 2021, an American video game developer based in Japan, named David Ginder, took their life amid a campaign of Kiwi Farms abuse.

Kiwi Farms is a forum similar in design to 4chan or 8chan, where anonymous posters gather. But instead of just spreading noxious discourse, Kiwi Farms users turn to the site to plan and coordinate. They work to make the lives of their targets a living hell. Their tactics include doxxing, SWATing, defaming, encouraging self-harm, and stalking, online and sometimes off.

Kiwi Farms harvests anguish. It thrives on pain and revels in death. Users of the innocuously named forum prey on the vulnerable and marginalized—people who are transgender, neurodivergent, disabled, financially struggling—with persistent and twisted harassment campaigns. Despite its penchant for destroying lives, Kiwi Farms has been mostly overlooked by the media for much of the site's existence. That is partly because of who it attacks, but also because reporters are wary of becoming targets themselves. The users call their victims "lolcows" because their pain can be milked for laughs. The group made its purpose clear on its Twitter page before it was taken down: "Gossip and exploitation of mentally handicapped for amusement purposes."

Kiwi Farms users deploy slightly different tactics for various victims, but the rough beats are the same. First, the group assembles extensive dossiers. Then they use the information (some true, some contorted, some fabricated) to torment their targets.

When Sagal posted about her suicidal thoughts, Kiwi Farms users sent private messages urging her to kill herself, a friend said. When posters learned that Terryberry, an 18-year-old with learning disabilities, used the internet to make friends, they worked to get her social media accounts shut down while mocking her mental health struggles. They relentlessly tormented Ginder for being nonbinary. One thread went on for more than a dozen pages.

"I've been bullied, ridiculed, and humiliated my entire life," Ginder explained in their online suicide note. "I could only just tolerate it with heavy depression when it was 4chan. But Kiwi Farms has made the harassment orders of magnitude worse."

Users gleefully imagined Ginder's death: "Here's hoping for a +1 to the kiwi kill count"; "Bruh I hope he streams his suicide. Quote me in the articles"; "Don't give in [and] delete the thread. Everyone will get a point on their counter if he does it, and I only need two more to get free a milkshake." Such discourse is typical. In threads about other targets, Kiwi Farms users have joked, "See the only problem with making a thread on a tranny post mortem is that we can't kill them a second time," and "hope the fat cunt strokes out and dies tbh, stop wasting my fucking taxes."

When journalists have covered Kiwi Farms, they've tended to label it a far-right forum, which is true but incomplete. Its members both love and detest figures like former President Donald Trump and white nationalist Nick Fuentes. Not necessarily because users disagree with either, but because both can be "cringe"—online parlance for corny. Kiwi Farms posters have ridiculed trans Twitch streamers, and troubled teens, and even Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene. They are deeply reactionary—many hate women, people of color, neurodivergent people, queer people—but they torment them as much for the need of a soft target as a political project.

"They were systematically trying to cause suicides," Yonah Gerber, an archivist in the video game industry who has spent the better part of a decade advocating for Kiwi Farms to be shut down, told me. "I was almost another—because I tried to kill myself twice."

The first time most people heard of Kiwi Farms was in August 2022, when popular trans Twitch streamer Clara Sorrenti said she had a SWAT team sent to her house, a favorite tactic of Kiwi Farms users and other serial harassers. "I was woken up by police officers and saw the assault rifle pointed at me," Sorrenti explained in a YouTube video. "I thought I was going to die." (Later that month, a Kiwi Farms user also SWATed Rep. Greene, according to a police report.)

Before then, Kiwi Farms victims had tried to fight back, with little success. But Sorrenti (whose handle is Keffals) had leverage: her large, passionate fanbase—nearly 150,000 followers on Twitter, more than 50,000 on Twitch. She created the #DropKiwiFarms campaign and asked her supporters—who can be as fervent as K-pop stans—to pressure web services and security provider Cloudflare to boot Kiwi

Farms as a client, effectively deplatforming the website by inhibiting its ability to fully function. Sorrenti's followers made sure that every time she tweeted about Kiwi Farms victims, or provided updates on the campaign, her posts got thousands of likes and retweets. National news stories soon followed. For weeks, Cloudflare did not respond. Then, on September 3, the company's CEO, Matthew Prince, wrote in a blog post that it had "taken steps to block [Kiwi Farms] content from being accessed through our infrastructure." Major outlets declared the death of "the worst place on the web." "The campaign is over. We won," Sorrenti said on September 5.

But nothing dies online, not completely. Kiwi Farms victims had already seen this firsthand, as shards of ephemeral information—photos, stray thoughts, personal missives—were built into portfolios of abuse by strangers. Kiwi Farms' founder and its users are extremely committed to keeping the website alive; it pops back into existence occasionally as it fights to find a secure host. Posters congregate on Telegram. They move between Discord servers. But whatever happens to the forum itself, the strategies of internet torture that Kiwi Farms honed have spread far beyond it.

Kiwi Farms is the dystopian endgame of those who think that doing anything short of pulling the trigger themselves is "free speech." The questions posed by Kiwi Farms' rise and apparent fall are increasingly urgent since Elon Musk bought Twitter, restoring thousands of accounts once banned for hate, harassment, and disinformation. Kiwi Farms is what happens when the internet democratizes everything, including the vile whims of those who want to inflict their wrath on people struggling even more than they are.

The story of Kiwi Farms is far from over. Despite being dropped by Cloudflare, Kiwi Farms could still gain a stable foothold. Even if it doesn't, the site and its users have defined internet culture for years to come. To understand that legacy requires going back to the beginning. And like so many internet origin stories, it starts with an angry young man.

JOSH MOON, the 30-year-old baby-faced troll king who founded Kiwi Farms a decade ago, lives with his mom in Pensacola, Florida. His story is fragmented, mostly buried in years of disorganized forum entries. He posts under the username "Null." His mother, who supports him, is a former nurse and now a real estate agent. He has dark brown hair. He does not appear to have a job.

Moon's rise can be traced back to Something Awful, an influential forum that profoundly shaped online culture by crafting an argot that was weird, funny, and cruel. In 2007, Something Awful users began posting about an otherwise unknown transgender, autistic, and very online 25-year-old in central Virginia named Christine Weston Chandler. Chandler was unemployed and struggling socially. Tracking her on the forum (a project that 4chan took part in, too) became a form of morbid, schadenfreude-laced entertainment. Chandler's social difficulties were so public and obvious that even the stereotypical nerd on 4chan or Something Awful could feel superior by comparison. "This guy used to leave 'business cards' at my school's library where he would hang out for hours looking for a 'boyfriend-free girl.' This is how I first learned of him," a Something Awful user wrote in one of the earliest posts about Chandler. "From here, I developed something of an obsession, culminating last summer when I made a special trip to a gaming store and local hangout where he had posted he would be. He was every bit as aspergic as I had imagined."

Moon took a heavy part in the Chandler bashing. He and the site's users fixated in particular on a diary Chandler posted called "Love Quest." In it, Chandler chronicled her experiences approaching women on the campus of Piedmont Virginia Community College with a sign that said "Seeking an 18-21-Year Old Single Female Companion." (She was rumored to have been banned from campus as a result.) Moon also lampooned the amateur internet comic series Chandler created, "Sonichu"—a mashup of Sonic the Hedgehog and Pikachu.

Accounts vary, but sometime around 2008, the group made a wiki called cwcki (pronounced "quickie," and playing on "wiki" and Christine Weston Chandler's initials) to exhaustively catalog Chandler's life. Every time she posted, they did too.

The nascent group soon added other targets. As it grew, Moon took a more active role. In 2013, almost five years after they began to keep records on Chandler, he offered to buy a hosting service and publicly attach his name. "I've volunteered to support the forum with a true and honest domain name and an actual host that isn't going to trash our happy home just because of whom it is centered around," Moon wrote. (Moon named his hosting service "Final Solutions," and later "1776 Solutions.") In 2013, he and the group changed the name of the wiki to Kiwi Farms, purportedly to make fun of how lolcows with speech impediments pronounced "cwcki forum."

Moon has called Kiwi Farms a "discussion forum" or a "comedy forum," but from the beginning he helped set the tone of conversations that had a far more insidious undercurrent. His username shows up frequently in early threads. He uploaded screenshots of Chandler's Facebook statuses, sometimes capturing them minutes after she wrote them, and dredged up her old blog posts. According to research compiled by SMAT (Social Media Analysis Toolkit), he mentioned the term "lolcow" more than 400 times, the fifth most of any user on the site.

Politically, Moon is a little all over the place, but generally he is far right: Moon has referred to President Obama as the "nigger in chief" and praised President Trump. Moon has been uncompromising in his commitment to preserving Kiwi Farms—even in the face of international pressure. After a gunman livestreamed his murderous rampage at a mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand, that killed 51 people in 2019, tech platforms—even 8chan—removed the video and the shooter's screed from their sites. Moon refused.

"You do not have the clout to eradicate a video from the internet and you do not have the legal reach to imprison everyone whose [*sic*] posted it. If anyone turns over to you the information they're asking for they're not only cowards, but they're fucking idiots," he wrote in a public response to requests from New Zealand authorities.

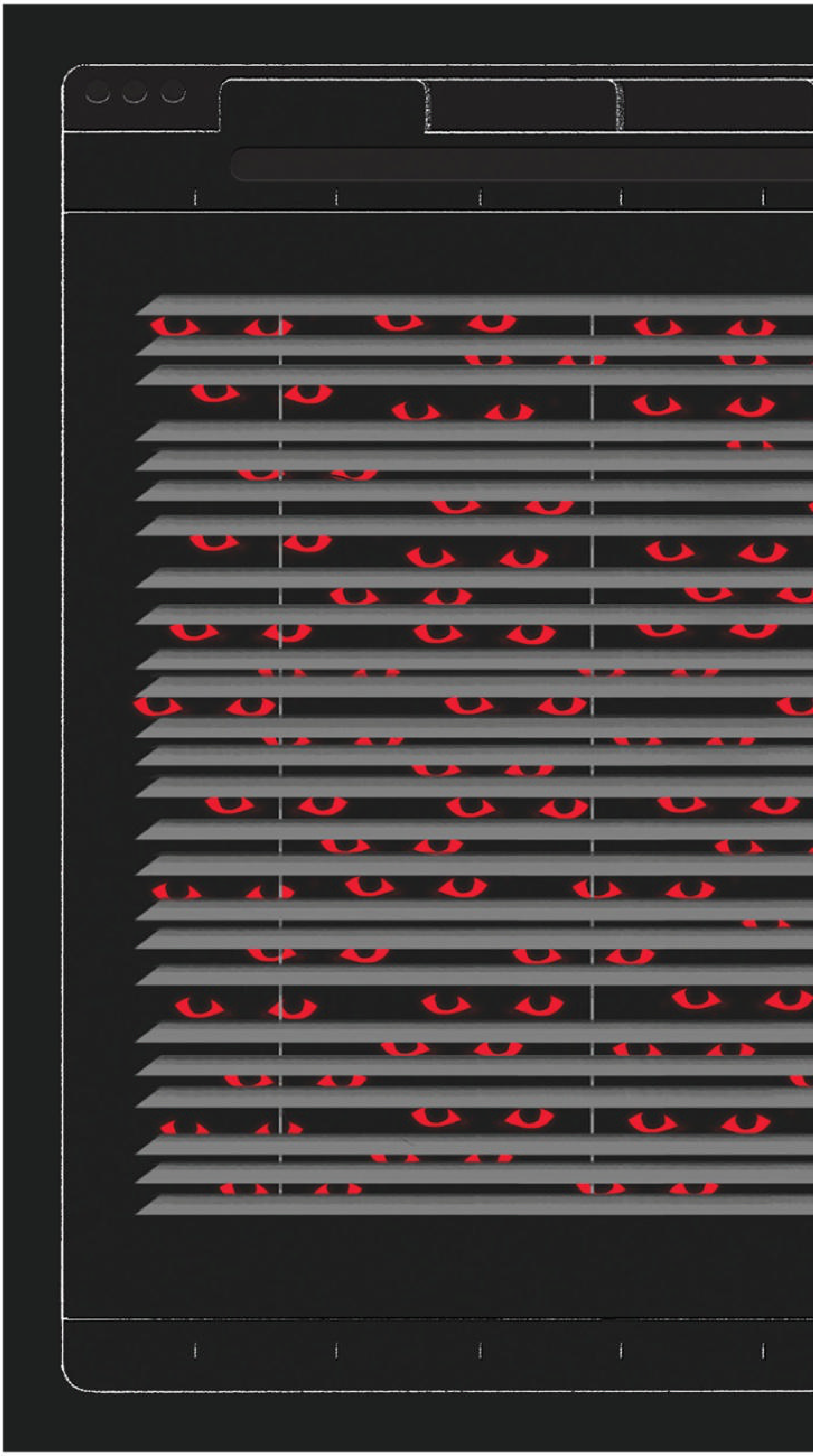
Moon isn't this bold offline. In 2016, Greta Martela, the co-founder of Trans Lifeline, a suicide prevention hotline for trans and gender-nonconforming people, was being hounded by Kiwi Farms. She found an address linked to Kiwi Farms—Moon's mother's house. Martela was driving through Florida already, she told me, so she decided to confront him. "His mom comes to the door, [and when I asked to speak with Joshua,] she said, 'He's not here. He's in the Philippines.'" Shortly thereafter, Moon posted on Kiwi Farms that he had been "taking a shit"—not hiding—when she arrived. Regardless, Martela said Kiwi Farms' harassment largely ceased after that. (Moon did not respond to a list of questions sent to him by *Mother Jones*.)

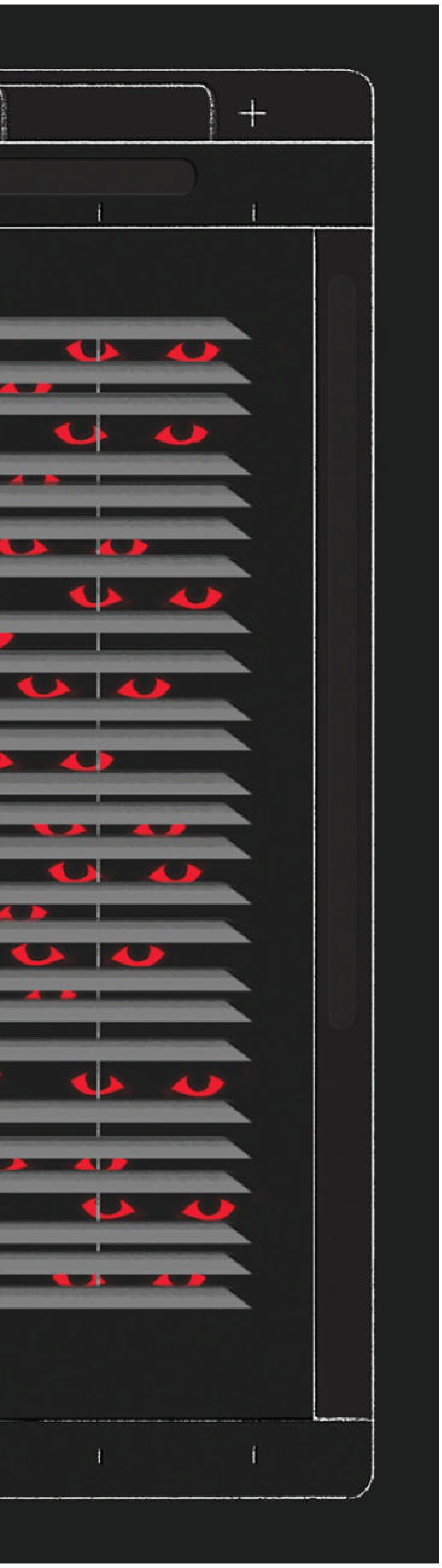
It was in their steady abuse of Chandler that Moon and the forum honed techniques that they'd come to use on scores of other people. As Margaret Pless reported in a 2016 *New York* magazine story, Kiwi Farms users would pose as journalists and contact "[Chandler's] pastor, and her parents." They pretended to be "former classmates, psychiatrists, potential business partners, and others, in the hopes these ruses [would] yield more confidential info" from those close to Chandler.

Kiwi Farms' methods had an obvious influence on Gamergate, the sprawling right-wing, anti-feminist online harassment campaign that took place in 2014 and 2015. There were also some direct connections. Tech magazine *Input* found that Moon created a dedicated Gamergate.us email service. Patrick Klepek reported in *Vice* that Kiwi Farms was, along with 4chan, "arguably responsible for the most heinous of Gamergate's actions." Participants in Gamergate mimicked Kiwi Farms' techniques: They doxxed their targets, threatened their lives, contacted their families, hacked their social media accounts, bombarded their phone lines, and tried to get them fired from their jobs.

The tactics pioneered by Kiwi Farms have also influenced QAnon-inspired crusades against hospitals treating trans children; Trumpers baselessly accusing a Texas butterfly sanctuary of human trafficking; and an anti-LGBTQ campaign spearheaded by Twitter account LibsofTikTok. Commentators and journalists often repeat the refrain that "everything is Gamergate" in response to such incidents. But it might be more accurate to say that everything is Kiwi Farms.

EVEN BEFORE KIWI FARMS set its sights on Victoria Darling in 2016, her life was hard. Darling (whose last name is a pseudonym that she uses publicly) had battled bouts of self-harm. In 2014, transphobes had attacked her as part of an online spat, doxxing





her address. The abuse got to her. Darling landed at an inpatient mental health facility in Spokane, Washington. Homeless after being released, Darling called a friend living in Portland, Oregon. The friend said she could come stay with her.

"It was against my better judgment, but I felt I needed to do it," Darling told me. At the time, she didn't know her new roommate was being harassed by Kiwi Farms. Then, Darling became a target, too.

"They put out my deadname. They sent us literal shit through the mail. They stole a phone number that I had for over ten years. I think they SIM-jacked me," she recounted, describing a method of swiping a phone line. "I was suspended from Facebook because they were using my number to harass people. I have lost friends because of them. I've lost connections because of them. I can't tell you how many close friends I've lost because of their lies and bullshit."

Darling's story is common. I spoke to multiple victims of harassment from Kiwi Farms users. One told me they made notecards so they wouldn't lose their train of thought when their emotions inevitably overwhelmed them as we talked. Another, Alexandria Christina Leal, spoke slowly. They chose words carefully. "I was in financial precarity," they began. Leal then paused and said deliberately, "During that time, I was living in a precarious situation. The goal was to kill me."

Kiwi Farms users obsessively hunt their victims. When Sorrenti, the Twitch streamer known as Keffals, fled her home as the harassment campaign against her escalated, she posted a picture of her cat on a bed. Kiwi Farms users found her location and sent pizzas to her room, using her deadname. (Sorrenti assumes Kiwi Farms members cross-referenced the bedsheets with those of area hotels.) Other survivors described similar experiences; one wrote online about their suspicion that Kiwi Farms users researched floor tiling patterns to ascertain their whereabouts.

Sometimes it is not even clear how Kiwi Farms users obtain their information. "They somehow figured out where I worked. I don't know how because I didn't post it on LinkedIn," Leal told me. A habitual refrain from survivors with whom I spoke was something along the lines of: "I don't know how they found out [x] but..." The torment makes every action online feel like a risk.

"You'll get followed for 5 to 10 years. Not every day maybe, but for years they will stalk you, and it's this unending nightmare. And it's designed to make you see that suicide is the only way out," Liz Fong-Jones, a software developer and trans activist who was a target, told me.

"They want you to think that there is no other way to get out of the situation," said Gerber, the video game industry archivist. Gerber recalled seeing Kiwi Farms posters discussing SWATing them in the hopes that police would kill their emotional support dog. "They were saying, 'If her dog gets shot maybe she'll kill herself,'" Gerber recalled.

If a target wasn't already in a desperate situation, members of the Kiwi Farms community have tried their best to drag them there. "They find lolcows, who in general are trans or disabled and economically precarious. They want to un-employ them. They want to un-house them," said Fong-Jones, "so that they are homeless, have nowhere to go, and will kill themselves." Fong-Jones was harassed by Kiwi Farms for her support of Trans Lifeline. But because of the financial stability she attained working in tech, including an 11-year stint at Google, Kiwi Farms members could not destabilize her and got bored. Other targets of Kiwi Farms users told me the same thing—the most vicious stalking was reserved for the most vulnerable.

"A thing that really stuck with me is that they said that I probably wasn't a lolcow because I have a car. That left no question in my mind that their primary target is impoverished people," a friend of Sagal, one of the victims who killed herself, told me. "They try to harm people who are too weak to fight back. They don't want their victims' families going after them. They want people who already lack social stability."

KIWI FARMS USERS often refer to themselves as "autists." This is helpful to remember.

On first glance, the forum can look ludicrously right wing. Racial epithets are common. So are slurs like "fag" and "tranny." Misgendering is the norm. Fredrik Knudsen, who has observed Kiwi Farms for his internet-focused documentary YouTube series, *Down the Rabbit Hole*, noted that "there is an understood anti-trans feeling" across the community. "They believe it's a sign of cultural degeneracy. It harkens back to their conservative bent," he said.

But Knudsen thinks there's something else happening beyond just ideology: "What draws people to the Kiwi Farms is difficult to place and is different for each person, but for a significant number of them, there are likely aspects of themselves that they see in the subjects of their derision," he explained. "Many of the people on the boards (unironically) profess to have autism or struggle to maintain relationships with other people." In conversations, the site's targets told me they often thought the harassers' similarities to their victims are part of the motivation. Take this comment from a 2015 thread partly justifying the harassment of Chandler:

> *When I worked at Kroger (which is a terrible idea for someone on the spectrum BTW) trying to fend off meltdowns was a daily, shitty experience. If it got particularly bad I'd sneak off to the restroom and self-injure, which actually broke a couple years being clean (something I haven't accomplished since, sadly).*

Another user responded:

> *Jeez, I've been lurking the site for a while, and all I see are a bunch of strange people with bizarre avatars talk about how they're normal by their own standards and how autism isn't an illness.*

Kiwi Farms has threads with titles like "How to make friends," "How do men make friends as adults," and "Why are all of my friends slobs." There are frequent posts about coping with having no close companions, working dead-end jobs, and overcoming severe loneliness and alienation. Like many of their targets, Kiwi Farms members often openly claim to be neurodivergent.

This can cause conflicts, especially when a poster acts too much like a target. Users have turned on each other for having characteristics that overlap with those of their victims. Famously, Anthony "A-Log" Logatto trolled one Kiwi Farms target so obsessively that fellow users started targeting him as well, dredging up his furry porn collection and Nickelodeon cartoon fan fiction. Kiwi Farms, according to Pless, who wrote for *New York* magazine about Kiwi Farms, reached a consensus conclusion that Logatto was so vicious because the original victim reminded A-Log of himself. If a community identical to Kiwi Farms existed, Kiwi Farms would probably deem it disgusting and troll it into the ground.

Kiwi Farms users see themselves as helpfully purging behavior they abhor—policing cringe. In 2013, an Indiegogo crowdfunding campaign for Sagal claimed that she needed lifesaving surgery for metal poisoning. Kiwi Farms posters claimed that the money was, in fact, intended for gender-transition surgery. The Indiegogo fundraiser was locked soon after. According to her friend, Sagal never received any money and didn't create the crowdfunding effort. But Kiwi Farms members used the allegations to justify relentlessly antagonizing Sagal.

In other moments, members wield far more serious claims. In August 2021, Chandler, the site's original target, was arrested on incest charges after an audio recording in which she claimed she had sex with her mother was posted on Kiwi Farms. Users quickly touted it as justification that their abuse of Chandler had been righteous all along. She is still being held in the men's wing of the local jail.

The full story of these incidents, and how exactly they were brought to light, is not yet known, and may never be. For most lolcows, people with scant online history, the preponderance of what exists about them on the internet is concocted by Kiwi Farms—a few real facts and old posts blended with lies, degraded by embellishment and exaggerations. The website's users fixate on what is available. They assume and extrapolate. And they create a new narrative—flattening any complexities like a penny on a railroad track.

This is how a Kiwi Farms user once summed up the site's ethos:

> *When you put something stupid/embarrassing/whatever on the internet, it's on the internet forever. After you put it out there, it becomes ours. We own it. And if we feel like digging it up and laughing at it, we will. And if you decide to chimp out over that, we will love you for it with all our hearts, and you too will become ours. And when something is ours, it's ours forever. We might get bored with it and put it down. We might play with it a little too hard and break it. But it never stops being ours, and someday in the future we'll remember it, and pick it back up again. Would you like to become ours my dear?*

DESPITE THE GROWING outrage over Kiwi Farms, it stayed online because of the resolute stubbornness of Cloudflare. The company provides websites with internet services that help them run faster and protect them from cyberattacks. Historically, it has been reluctant to ban sites on free speech grounds. As Sorrenti's fans amped up the #DropKiwiFarms campaign, CEO Matthew Prince likened such a demand to saying that a "fire department shouldn't respond to fires in the homes of people who do not possess sufficient moral character."

The company *had* buckled to public scrutiny before. In 2017, following the rally of white nationalists in Charlottesville, it banned the neo-Nazi site Daily Stormer. In

> “THEY WERE SYSTEMATICALLY TRYING TO CAUSE SUICIDES. I WAS ALMOST ANOTHER.”

2019, following the El Paso massacre, it banned 8chan. Back then, Prince explained that decision by noting that the website has “repeatedly proven itself to be a cesspool of hate” and “has caused multiple tragic deaths.” He added, “Even if 8chan may not have violated the letter of the law in refusing to moderate their hate-filled community, they have created an environment that revels in violating its spirit.”

You could swap “8chan” for “Kiwi Farms” without changing any of the descriptions. Still, Prince at first resisted #DropKiwiFarms, writing in an August 31 post, “We do not believe we have the political legitimacy to determine generally what is and is not online by restricting security or core Internet services. If that content is harmful, the right place to restrict it is legislatively.”

But on September 3, 2022, after media began to cover Kiwi Farms in earnest, Prince flipped. He said that “specific, targeted threats have escalated over the last 48 hours to the point that we believe there is an unprecedented emergency and immediate threat to human life unlike we have previously seen from Kiwi Farms or any other customer before.” He called Cloudflare’s decision “dangerous” and “extraordinary.”

After the ban, Moon continued to provide updates to Kiwi Farms users on Telegram. SMAT analysis provided by Emmi Bevensee, a disinformation researcher, showed that Kiwi Farms had roughly 54,000 usernames registered. Hardcore members took to private channels to stay connected.

According to another researcher (who isn’t publicly authorized to share their findings), addresses associated with Moon and Kiwi Farms received 4.6 bitcoins between 2019 and 2021—worth more than $317,000 at bitcoin’s peak in November 2021. (In my own analysis of crypto addresses that Kiwi Farms has listed on its site to solicit donations, I found that it has also received tens of thousands of dollars’ worth of ethereum since 2017.) According to that researcher, about half of the bitcoins sent to Moon and his site have passed through centralized exchanges—including Kraken, BlockFi, and Coinbase, which has a set of rules against inciting harassment.

Google has also played a role in helping Kiwi Farms persist. For people with meager online histories, a long Kiwi Farms thread can form a toxic digital first impression for employers or anyone else who searches their names. Even higher-profile targets were vulnerable. “One of the big things that hit me running for office is that when you Google my name, Kiwi Farms is one of the first things that shows up,” said Brianna Wu, a video game developer and former congressional candidate who was also a major target of Gamergate. “It’s hard when you have these people who create your reputation in a way that permanently damages it,” she added.

Google doesn’t often delist domains. In 2015, it briefly removed 8chan’s homepage from search results over “suspected child abuse content.” Google spokesperson Colette Garcia said in a statement that “we design our search ranking systems to avoid exposing people to hateful and harmful content if they are not explicitly looking for it” and “have policies under which people can

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A Native woman fought for years to gain custody of her granddaughter.

Now the case is before the Supreme Court

and could have consequences far beyond child welfare.

By Julia Lurie · Illustrations by Natasha Donovan

Forever Home

“Can you tell the cou
about what she was

It was December 2018, and Robyn Bradshaw sat on the witness stand in the Hennepin County Juvenile Justice Center in Minneapolis, fighting for custody of her granddaughter. The night before, Bradshaw had attended a support ceremony with other members of her tribe, the White Earth Band of Ojibwa, to give her strength through the hearing. But as she answered questions from her lawyer, Bradshaw’s breath was short and her heart raced. The face of her granddaughter, a quick-witted, energetic 7-year-old with big brown eyes and thick black curls, flashed in her mind. So, too, did the thought that had resurfaced countless times over the year: *I cannot lose her again*.

The girl, who goes by P.S. in court records, was born on a summer day in 2011. P.S. and her mother, Suzanne, moved in with Bradshaw, who cared for the baby while Suzanne worked as a bus driver and bank teller. P.S. turned into a lively toddler who shrieked as she bounced in the crib and chased her grandmother around the kitchen. She loved to swim and play with her cousins who lived nearby. For more than three years, according to court documents Bradshaw later filed, “P.S. was raised in a loving and stable home with Ms. Bradshaw and P.S.’s mother as active, full-time caregivers.”

Everything changed in 2014, when Suzanne plummeted into drug addiction. Without her daughter’s income, Bradshaw struggled to pay rent, and the family was evicted. Bradshaw and P.S. crashed with friends, and then with a cousin. At one point, they were turned away from a shelter because Bradshaw couldn’t prove that she was P.S.’s biological grandmother. As Bradshaw looked for stable housing, she asked P.S.’s father to temporarily care for the 3-year-old. But things went from bad to worse: One August morning, Bradshaw received a call from Suzanne, who was being held in jail. She and P.S.’s father had been arrested on drug charges, and P.S. had been taken into state custody. Bradshaw immediately called the county to ask when she could pick up her granddaughter.

It is easy to imagine an outcome where Bradshaw brought P.S. home and went on to raise her, possibly with some governmental assistance. This would line up with state and federal guidance, which both recommend that children remain with relatives unless those family members pose an immediate safety risk. Bradshaw had additional legal force on her side: the Indian Child Welfare Act, the landmark 1978 legislation aimed at keeping Native families and communities intact. ICWA adds guardrails at every step of a child welfare case, raising the standards needed to remove a child and mandating that, when Native children are removed, states make proactive efforts to place the children with other family or members of the same tribe.

Instead, the county argued that P.S. couldn’t stay with her grandmother because Bradshaw had a 15-year-old felony conviction for receipt of stolen property. Plus, Bradshaw was flagged for having been involved with Child Protective Services before, when Suzanne was 16. For the next two years, P.S. was placed in six different homes. In the summer of 2016, she landed in the home of a couple named Danielle and Jason Clifford, who wanted to adopt her.

The subsequent custody battle for P.S.—with Bradshaw on one side, and the Cliffords on the other—is one of three lawsuits that now form the basis of the Supreme Court case known as *Brackeen v. Haaland*. In all three cases, non-Native foster parents wanted to adopt Native children. Two of the three were ultimately successful in doing so, but all say they encountered unconstitutional barriers because of ICWA. Now, the foster parents are suing the federal government in an attempt to overturn the law, which they say represents race-based discrimination and an overly intrusive federal government. They have found support from attorneys general in three states, along with conservative groups like the Cato Institute, the Goldwater Institute, and the Bradley Foundation.

ICWA supporters, meanwhile, counter that the law’s focus on placing kids with their kin is the gold standard for child welfare policy reform. “All children would benefit from such a commitment,” reads an amicus brief in support of the defendants, filed by dozens of child welfare and adoption organizations. Some legal experts argue that the law, like much of Native sovereignty, is based not on race, but rather on tribes’ unique political status. A ruling against ICWA could pave the way for future attempts to erode Native sovereignty, leading to “the unraveling of the legal structure that defends the rights of Indigenous nations in this country,” says Rebecca Nagle, host of *This Land*, an

rt a little bit like as a baby?”

investigative podcast about Native issues that devoted a season to the case.

During oral arguments in November, the three liberal justices and Justice Neil Gorsuch seemed to share Nagle’s concern. Gorsuch, a consistent advocate of tribal rights, noted that if ICWA were ruled unconstitutional, then health care provisions, environmental regulations, and access to sacred sites for Native Americans “would seem to go.” He warned the plaintiffs’ lawyer, “We’re going to be busy, counsel, if this is the line we’re going to draw. Very, very busy.”

Perhaps more than any other, P.S.’s case shows, with striking clarity, the two possible fates that could result from the Supreme Court decision, which is expected in the spring. Because of procedural mix-ups, P.S.’s case didn’t qualify as an ICWA case for the first two years she was in state custody. During that time, as P.S. went from one foster home to the next, Bradshaw’s contact with P.S. was minimized and eventually cut off altogether. It was all but certain that the Cliffords would adopt P.S. And then, the case took a dramatic turn: Suddenly it *did* qualify as an ICWA case. Bradshaw, once deemed dangerous, was considered a viable caregiver after all. In the story of a single family, then, the stakes of the Supreme Court decision come into sharp relief: what happens in a world with ICWA, and what happens in a world without it.

BRADSHAW IS ALL too familiar with family separation. When she was about 10, she was forced to attend an Indian boarding school, part of a 150-year effort to strip Native children of their identities and reform them in the image of white Christian ideals. The directive of Richard Henry Pratt, the military officer who founded the first such school in 1879, came to define this effort: “Kill the Indian...and save the man.” By the mid-1920s, an estimated 61,000 children—about four-fifths of Native children—attended the schools.

This part of her life is hazy to Bradshaw, and she has no desire to dwell on it. “I never want to think about it again,” she said the first time we spoke. What she knows is that, one week, she was living at home in North Minneapolis, helping her mom take care of her younger siblings, and the next week, she was very far from home—in Oklahoma, she thinks—at a boarding school. She ran away from the school twice before being reunited with her family after four months.

Just as the boarding school era came to a close in the 1960s, government programs emerged to place Native children with non-Native adoptive families. “Child welfare systems picked up where the boarding schools left off,” says David Simmons, director of government affairs and advocacy at the National Indian Child Welfare Association. “They took away the things that Native people had used to help them survive and thrive—teaching young people how to parent, what their role in the community was.” A 1966 Bureau of Indian Affairs press release for the Indian Adoption Project read, “One little, two little, three little Indians—and 206 more—are brightening the homes and lives of 172 American families, mostly non-Indians, who have taken the Indian waifs as their own.” But alarming statistics soon emerged: Between 25 and 35 percent of all Native children were being separated from their families and put in foster homes, adoptive homes, or institutions, according to surveys by the Association on American Indian Affairs.

The debate that ultimately led to ICWA’s passage in 1978 is at the heart of the Supreme Court case today: “Who decides whether an Indian child needs to be removed from his or her home, and who decides where and how that child is to be raised?” read a 1976 report submitted to the Senate’s Committee on Indian Affairs. The decision, the committee concluded, is “inherently biased by the cultural setting of the decisionmaker.” Social workers making custody decisions may be “poorly trained, often biased or judgmental,” and they impose “cultural and familial values which are often opposed to values held by the Indian family.”

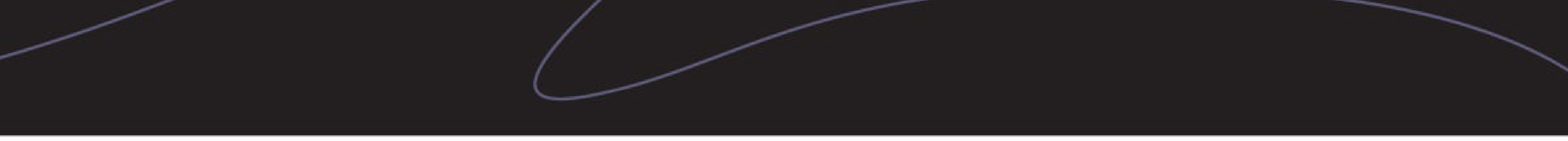
This concept, that a person’s background informs their opinion of how to raise a child, is simple enough to grasp, but continues to bedevil the child welfare system—a system in which predominantly white, middle- and upper-class judges and CPS employees make quick, life-altering decisions about the living situations of disproportionately poor, Black and brown families. The vast majority of CPS investigations are not for physical abuse, but for the broad, subjective allegation of “neglect.” While one caseworker might encounter an empty fridge, or a young child home alone, or a parent with a history of drugs, and decide the parent is neglectful, another caseworker might decide the family needs help, and a third might decide there's no problem to begin with. Often, the conclusion that the caseworker draws is as much a reflection of the caseworker as it is of the family under investigation.

ICWA aimed to change the decision makers in child welfare cases, requiring the caseworkers and lawyers to have a background in Native history and culture. Except in emergency situations, a child can be removed from the home only with the support of a "qualified expert witness" familiar with the child's tribe. Tribes can become legal parties in the case; research has shown that tribal presence lessens the amount of time kids spend in foster care. Instead of the "reasonable efforts" the state is required to make to reunite children with their families in most child welfare cases, ICWA-trained caseworkers must make "active efforts" to prevent the breakup of Native families.

"My approach to families is I ask them, 'How can I help you?'" says Lee Goodman, a White Earth social worker who works on ICWA cases. "I had one particular case where the mother looked at me and said, 'Nobody ever asked me that before.'"

AFTER P.S. WAS taken into state custody, Bradshaw amassed a long list of relatives and friends who could serve as foster parents. She reached out to pro bono lawyers and nonprofit contacts who might be able to help her. She repeatedly asked the county to be the girl's caregiver. "I called, I called and I called and I called and they kept hanging up on me," she later testified, according to documents *Mother Jones* obtained from the Hennepin County District Court in Minnesota, one of the few states where family court proceedings are publicly available. "It was 'no.' Everything was 'no' all the time."

A state court later found that this was a key moment when things went wrong. County social workers failed to inform Bradshaw that it was possible for her to apply to set aside her criminal offense so she could foster her granddaughter. County officials either didn't look into or denied each of Bradshaw's foster placement suggestions—including P.S.'s grandfather, on the grounds that he didn't know her well enough.



Perhaps most importantly, both Hennepin County and the White Earth tribe failed to identify that the case qualified under ICWA. The law applies only to children who are members of tribes or eligible to enroll in tribes, and when Hennepin County reached out to White Earth's child services division in 2015, its director said P.S. wasn't eligible. Suzanne was not enrolled, and, in its correspondence with White Earth, the county neglected to mention that Bradshaw, who was a tribal member, was seeking custody.

For the next two years, as P.S. bounced from one home to the next, she suffered from separation anxiety disorder, a condition often characterized in children by extreme distress about being away from loved ones, clinginess, and reluctance to be alone.

Her progress was closely monitored by her guardian ad litem, a trained volunteer named Barbara Reis. Guardians ad litem play key roles in child welfare proceedings: They visit foster homes, check in with therapists, county caseworkers, and teachers, and, armed with these observations, represent the interests of the child in court proceedings. Reis, a 67-year-old white woman who'd retired after a career in education, would ultimately log more than 350 hours on P.S.'s case. From her first time encountering Bradshaw, at the initial hearing in the fall of 2014, Reis was skeptical.

"From the beginning, and I don't mean to sound harsh, but I feel I need to speak the truth, there were many small but significant red flags that appeared with Ms. Bradshaw," Reis later testified, pointing to Bradshaw's bouts of homelessness and her criminal history. "I do have concerns and it's based on the fact that I myself am a parent, I myself am a former teacher. I know the types of things that are essential to develop, raise kids in this day and age." Bradshaw, she concluded, was not equipped to care for P.S.

Bradshaw's contact with her granddaughter during this period was sporadic. Only one foster parent, a distant family friend, allowed her to visit, and for those few months, Bradshaw visited P.S. every day. But when the foster parent complained that Bradshaw was too involved, county officials limited Bradshaw's contact. She could see her granddaughter only when Suzanne visited, and Suzanne was in and out of jail and rehab.

In the summer of 2016, the county terminated Suzanne's parental rights. Termination has been analogized to the civil death penalty: Typically, it means cutting off all ties with biological family. Bradshaw went with Suzanne to her hourlong "goodbye visit" with P.S. at the county CPS offices. P.S.'s father and grandfather came too. "We sat there, we took photos, we hugged each other, loved each other up," Bradshaw remembers. She couldn't stop thinking about her granddaughter's uncertain future: Would she go from foster home to foster home? Would she become one of those CPS horror stories you hear about on the news? Who was going to take in this child, and how would they treat her?

PARENTAL TERMINATION freed P.S. for adoption, and the county already had a family in mind: Danielle and Jason Clifford. The Cliffords met salsa dancing while students at Bethel University, a small Christian school in Minnesota. Jason is white; Danielle has Native ancestry on her father's side, though she doesn't identify as Native American in federal court documents. When the couple found out that they couldn't have biological children, they decided that adopting a foster child was "the way that God had ordained for us to have a family," Danielle testified. "We had a lot of prayer over that."

Reis and a county social worker, Jodi Castillo, met with the Cliffords and told the couple they were looking for a "forever home" for 5-year-old P.S. The Cliffords were told that there had been an "extensive relative search" and that while P.S.'s grandmother was interested in adopting her, that wasn't an option "for many reasons," said Danielle. "We weren't given those reasons." Reis and Castillo urged the Cliffords to avoid contact with Bradshaw. "I thought she would be a bad influence and that she would tear things apart if she were to become a part of their life," Reis later recalled.

By all accounts, the Cliffords provided a loving, supportive environment for P.S. The first time they met, Danielle said, "we clicked. It was like she had been meant to be a part of our family." The Cliffords enrolled P.S. in Girl Scouts and dance classes and took her to parks and museums. Danielle, then a stay-at-home mom, went through a pre-K workbook with P.S. for an hour each day. The family attended church, where Danielle and Jason were leaders in the kids' ministry. P.S. "loved going and singing and learning about Jesus and doing crafts," Danielle testified. At night, the couple read books and prayed with P.S.,

Case Workers

A group of think tanks and foundations are angling to topple the Indian Child Welfare Act.

GRACE MOLTENI/MOTHER JONES; GETTY (2)

BRACKEEN V. HAALAND did not organically evolve from a local custody fight to a Supreme Court case. Rather, it is the result of a yearslong effort by a small group of right-wing organizations to overturn ICWA.

Among them are the Goldwater Institute, a conservative think tank in Arizona that has argued against ICWA in more than a dozen cases since 2015, claiming that the law denies Native children equal protection against abuse and neglect because of their race. Clint Bolick, who led Goldwater's litigation strategy before becoming a justice for the Arizona Supreme Court, has made a name for himself arguing discrimination in cases ranging from voting rights to school integration to affirmative action. The *New York Times* once referred to Bolick as the "political right's point man on race."

Several of the groups supporting the plaintiffs—including Goldwater, the Cato Institute, the Texas Public Policy Foundation, and the Project on Fair Representation—have received substantial funding from the fossil fuel billionaire Koch brothers and their network. Critics note that the fossil fuel industry has a track record of supporting cases that threaten tribal sovereignty. "The collective rights of a nation and its sovereignty must be weakened or destroyed to gain access to its lands and resources," noted Native journalist and historian Nick Estes in the *Guardian*.

Another common source of funding is the Bradley Foundation, a family organization in Wisconsin that funds coordinated, state-based bills and movements for conservative causes—like voter ID laws or, more recently, the organizations stoking fear about election fraud. The foundation provided seed funding for Goldwater's litigation strategy, which, according to a grant proposal, promised to provide "state-based strategies to protect freedom against further governmental intrusion." In this light, ICWA is simply one of many federal laws that intrude on states' rights and stand in the way of building conservative power.

"As a Native journalist, this was almost worse than uncovering some plot to undo tribal sovereignty," said Rebecca Nagle on *This Land*. "It means that this attack on ICWA, where stakes are so high for Native families and tribes, is just collateral damage in a bigger conservative agenda." ***—J.L.***

> **A child being adopted out of the tribe is no small matter, testified Alan Roy, secretary treasurer of White Earth. “We need every child,” he said. “There’s only so many of us.”**

who slept in a lofted, princess-themed bed with a slide. P.S. called Danielle and Jason “Mommy” and “Daddy.”

Reis was thrilled. “P.S. moved into this home in July and is thriving,” she wrote in a 2017 progress report. “This is the perfect placement for her.”

The Cliffords tried to teach the girl about her heritage, taking her to a Mother’s Day powwow, making wild rice, and reading Native folklore. Danielle tried to educate herself as well, reading everything from history books about the Trail of Tears to *Everything You Wanted to Know About Indians But Were Afraid to Ask*. “Unfortunately, there aren’t very many history books from a Native perspective,” she testified. “I had difficulty finding very many.”

Still, P.S. had trouble adjusting. She often dissociated, staring into space. She threw tantrums, sometimes for more than an hour. Castillo and Reis told the Cliffords that P.S. needed to see a therapist, but all the providers they recommended had long waitlists. Through their church, Danielle found a therapist named Samantha Colai, who had recently finished training at a Christian counseling center. P.S. was her first Native client, so she, too, tried to educate herself. She read *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, she said, “to get an understanding of what happens within the culture and within US history.” She sought out a Native mentor to help her navigate P.S.’s case. Based on what a county social worker had told her, Colai thought the Cliffords were adopting P.S., and she worked with them on long-term strategies for prioritizing predictability and structure.

Several times, the Cliffords asked Reis if they should allow Bradshaw to visit her granddaughter, as Bradshaw had repeatedly requested. But Reis was steadfast in her position: “I felt like there was some dysfunction happening and I felt that grandmother wouldn’t have good judgment,” she later testified.

So the Cliffords kept their distance. “We were told that [P.S.]’s extended family was not safe,” said Danielle. “Of course, we weren’t going to put a child with someone who wasn’t safe.” An adoption agreement was drawn up.

BRADSHAW, HOWEVER, hadn’t given up hope. Around the same time that P.S. first arrived in the Cliffords’ home, Bradshaw walked into the Upper Midwest American Indian Center, a nonprofit in Minneapolis that supports Native families. She explained the situation: how she had raised P.S., how the county had denied her as a foster placement, and how her tribe had remained uninvolved.

Upper Midwest jumped into action. That day, a foster care licensing worker named Bobbi Rodriguez spent two hours helping Bradshaw fill out the application necessary to apply for a foster license and set aside her criminal record. “There was nothing on her background that was alarming to me,” Rodriguez later testified. Rather than dismiss Bradshaw as unqualified to be a foster parent because of her criminal history, Rodriguez saw her as a potential caregiver who needed to show that her background wouldn’t be a problem.

When Upper Midwest alerted White Earth that a member of the tribe was seeking custody of her granddaughter, White Earth sprang into action, too. A child being adopted out of the tribe is no small matter, testified Alan Roy, secretary treasurer of White Earth. Not only does the child risk losing their connection to their community, but the tribe risks losing another member. When families rupture, said Roy, systemic problems emerge, from unemployment to substance use to educational challenges. “Everything is affected,” he said, “if this child were not to have a relationship with her people. We need every child. There’s only so many of us.”

In early 2017, White Earth wrote the court, indicating P.S. was eligible for membership after all, and moved to intervene as a party in the case. Suddenly, what had been a typical county child welfare case became an ICWA case. Until White Earth’s involvement, the county had supported the Cliffords in their plan to adopt P.S. But once ICWA applied, the county reversed course: It supported what the tribe wanted, and the tribe wanted Bradshaw to have custody of her granddaughter.

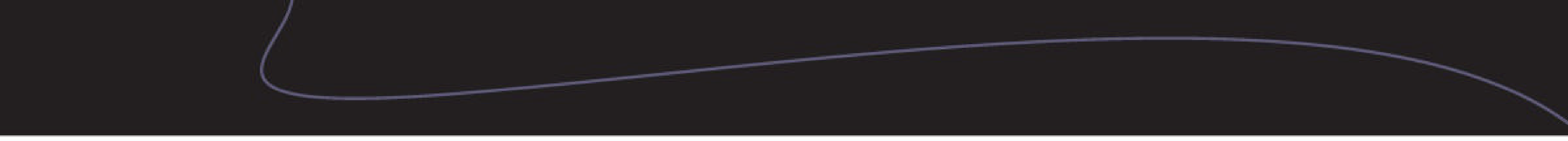
In the summer of 2017, after not seeing P.S. for a year, Bradshaw was allowed a supervised visit. It proved to be one of countless interactions that functioned like a Rorschach test: Those on both sides of the custody battle had dramatically different conclusions about what happened. To Bradshaw, the visit was an occasion to celebrate. “I brought her an abundance of gifts that I saved up over the year,” Bradshaw testified. She brought crayons, coloring books, stuffed animals, games, and shampoo for kids. She also brought a note from Suzanne, which Bradshaw didn’t know she wasn’t allowed to do. “Grandma is fighting hard for you and we're all standing behind her," it read. "You've [been] such a brave and strong girl for too long. Just keep it up for a little while longer. Love to the moon & back, always & forever."

To the Cliffords, all this—especially the letter from Suzanne—suggested Bradshaw had problems with boundaries. The presents, said Jason, were "random items" from a dollar store. "We have previously asked Robyn not to send large quantities of gifts, as this is now the fourth large load of gifts," wrote the Cliffords in an affidavit. The previous Christmas, for example, Bradshaw had asked if she and Suzanne could send a present. After discussions with Colai, Reis, and Castillo, the Cliffords decided to allow Bradshaw and Suzanne to "send a gift that would be given as a gift from Santa." Bradshaw and Suzanne were provided a list of "reasonable gifts," and given instructions to leave the tags and packaging on, and include no cards. Instead, Bradshaw sent enough gifts to fill a car trunk. "None of those things were items on [P.S.'s] wish list, numerous items did not have original packaging or tags and there were many hidden messages," reads the affidavit.

Still, over the fall of 2017, visits with Bradshaw progressed to overnight and weekend stays. P.S. shuttled not only between caretakers, but between socioeconomic realities. As is often the case, the parents wanting to adopt were more financially stable than the child's relatives. Bradshaw relied on Social Security, lived in public housing, and drove a car that often broke down. For a time, she had one bed; when P.S. came for sleepovers, the two would snuggle and read books before Bradshaw, who had arthritis, retired to the sofa so P.S. could have the bed to herself.

According to the Cliffords, the visits with Bradshaw came at a cost to P.S.'s diet—"We had been working on a very consistent food schedule," Jason testified—and more importantly, her mental health. After visits with Bradshaw, P.S. became emotionally volatile, breaking down at the smallest thing. The Cliffords were constantly encouraging P.S. to take deep breaths, to listen, and to follow the rules, testified Danielle.

When P.S. moved in with the Cliffords, the couple had put together a photo album of P.S.'s biological family. P.S. hadn't ex-



pressed interest in it in months. Yet after the first visit with Bradshaw, she sat on the floor in tears as she leafed through the photos. “Since the visit, she has walked around with the photo book, several times, open to pictures of her with either her mother or father,” reads the affidavit. She became more clingy with the Cliffords, throwing tantrums when one or the other left the house. But she also asked why she had to wait so many days to see her grandmother. “She keeps saying she wants her mom and wants to move back in with her mom,” according to the affidavit. “[P.S.] has had multiple times where she has cried so hard that she has needed to be held and rocked for a long time until she is able to calm herself.”

IN JANUARY 2018, the state set aside Bradshaw’s felony conviction, allowing her to become a licensed foster parent. At long last, P.S. moved in with Bradshaw. It was a “major, major” change, says Bradshaw. The two soon settled into a routine. On weekdays, P.S. ate breakfast while she watched her favorite cartoons. She could choose between mini pancakes or waffles, cereal, hard-boiled eggs—“whatever she wants,” testified Bradshaw. They walked with their puppy to catch the school bus. P.S. kept busy after school: a nutrition program on Mondays, tutoring on Tuesdays, ballet on Wednesdays, game night on Fridays.

Because a key element of ICWA is aligning foster placements with Native cultural norms, P.S. started seeing a new therapist at the Indian Health Board named Megan Eastman. Eastman, who is Native and white, had trained to adapt common therapeutic practices, like cognitive behavioral therapy, for Native populations. She noticed similar behaviors as Colai, like anxiety related to separation. But her style was different: In court, she described her goal as to “help be a healer and help to repair families and keep families together.”

In the year that passed before a judge ultimately decided who should adopt the girl, Bradshaw and P.S. met regularly with both Reis and ICWA caseworkers. They had strikingly different interpretations of how the first grader and her grandmother were doing.

Take, for example, the home visits: Joseph Thompson, a county social worker who specializes in ICWA cases, observed

The Brackeens were ideal plaintiffs: Their case fell under the jurisdiction of Texas federal Judge Reed O'Connor, who has a long history of siding with Republican attorneys general filing ideological lawsuits in cases that get to the Supreme Court.

that "the home is neatly appointed. There's always food available. [P.S.] appears to be happy and doing well."

Reis, meanwhile, worried that she was eating too much junk food and not getting enough exercise. "I observed that she has gained weight around her bottom," she noted on a visit in April 2018. "I observed 3 Easter baskets filled with candy in the home. [P.S.] was sitting watching TV eating graham crackers."

There was also disagreement around structure: Reis took issue with the fact that P.S. hadn't gone to summer school, and that she didn't have clear expectations. "A parent says…'You gotta do this and gotta do that,' and you just develop thick skin," testified Reis.

Stephen Luzar, a White Earth psychologist, saw the situation differently: In Native communities, he said, children "are allowed to run free, explore, develop their own thoughts, emotions, ideas on whatever the topic is, and to come back and check in," he said. It's still possible, he noted, to have boundaries and consistency with this parenting style.

Even P.S.'s demeanor was hotly debated. To Reis, P.S. seemed distracted and withdrawn. "She did not sing to herself like I have observed at the Cliffords, or twirl around in a happy, playful way," she wrote in her notes. "The light in her eyes seemed dimmer, the sparkle less bright." Meanwhile, Priscilla Day, a child welfare consultant who works with Native families, said the opposite: "She was singing and dancing. She wanted to show us dance steps. She would make jokes and had a sense of humor."

There may have been more than just different cultural interpretations at play. As Luzar pointed out, it wasn't surprising that Bradshaw and P.S. were sometimes guarded under observation. "Based on how Natives have been treated in this country over 500 years," he said, many have a "healthy paranoia" when interacting with government authorities. Bradshaw "knows that everything that she says will be written down, or everything that she says will be analyzed, and everything that she says will be used, potentially, in court." As a result, he said, often "Native people will just not say anything."

AS P.S. GOT USED to her new home, the Cliffords mounted a legal battle for custody of the girl. They weren't the only foster parents frustrated with ICWA: A similar battle was playing out 1,000 miles south, in Fort Worth, Texas, where Jennifer and Chad Brackeen sought custody of a Native child in their care. Like the Cliffords, the Brackeens were motivated by faith: The white evangelical couple had come to believe that welcoming foster children into their well-appointed home was one way, they told the *New York Times* in 2019, to "rectify our blessings." But unlike the Cliffords, the Brackeens were successful in their custody battle. When a judge ordered that their foster son be adopted by a Navajo couple, the Brackeens pushed back, obtaining an emergency stay. Eventually, the tribe backed out, clearing the way for the Brackeens' adoption.

Nevertheless, days before the tribe conceded, the couple filed a federal lawsuit aimed at overturning ICWA. Their case transformed from a local custody battle to something different altogether when Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton, a Trump-backed mainstay in conservative legal battles, joined as a co-plaintiff. The subsequent fight is the result of a yearslong effort by a coterie of conservative groups to kill off ICWA. Gibson Dunn, the law firm representing the Brackeens pro bono, is perhaps best known for defending Facebook in the Cambridge Analytica case, or advocating for George W. Bush in *Bush v. Gore*, but it has notably represented several plaintiffs taking issue with laws specific to Native communities, including the corporation behind the Dakota Access pipeline. It was Gibson Dunn, which shares a revolving door with the Texas attorney general's office, that alerted Paxton's office to the Brackeens' case.

The same day that the Brackeens and Texas filed the federal lawsuit, Nagle reports, Paxton's office sent an email blast to other Republican attorneys general, inviting them to join the case. The subject line read, "New Federalism Case Opportunity." Soon, Louisiana and Indiana had signed on, joining conservative groups like the Goldwater Institute, an Arizona think tank that has argued against ICWA in more than a dozen cases since 2015. Meanwhile, the legal team reached out to families filing similar suits—thus finding the Cliffords, who signed on as co-plaintiffs.

The plaintiffs' complaint describes P.S.'s situation in two short paragraphs. The Cliffords' home was "the only stable home [P.S.] has ever known," whereas Bradshaw was "the grandparent previously found to be an unfit placement by the state." The plaintiffs fail to mention that Bradshaw was P.S.'s full-time caregiver for the first three years of her life, or her constant fight to reunite with her granddaughter. The complaint blames ICWA for the "ordeal" suffered by the Cliffords and P.S.

The Brackeens were ideal plaintiffs: Their case fell under the jurisdiction of Texas federal Judge Reed O'Connor, who has a long history of siding with Republican attorneys general filing ideological lawsuits in cases that make their way to the Supreme Court. O'Connor also struck down the Affordable Care Act, ruled against DACA, and rescinded protections for transgender youth. Between 2015 and 2018, nearly half of the lawsuits that Paxton filed to overturn federal laws were heard by O'Connor. It came as no surprise when, in October 2018, O'Connor ruled that ICWA violates the Fifth Amendment's equal protection guarantee, paving the way for the appeal to the Supreme Court.

THE SUPREME COURT could strike down ICWA, but its ruling won't affect who has custody of P.S.; that was decided in December 2018. Over the course of five days, 20 witnesses testified in an evidentiary hearing, picking apart her grades, her weight, her social life, her therapy appointments, her hobbies. Lawyers for the county, White Earth, and Bradshaw argued that P.S. was happy and healthy; Reis and lawyers for the Cliffords suggested she was neither. (Notably, Reis had softened her opinion on Bradshaw, testifying, "I have apologized to her, and I see that she is a very strong force, she's very gentle and loving with [P.S.].")

On January 17, 2019, Judge Angela Willms released her decision. She was pointed in her critique of the county, for not seriously considering Bradshaw from the start; of White Earth, for failing to realize that Bradshaw was a member; and of Reis, whose conclusions were not credible, as her behavior suggested she "will never believe Ms. Bradshaw is a successful parent no matter what she does."

If not for these failures, "none of this would have happened," wrote Willms. "Instead, P.S. has been traumatized by our system due to numerous failed placements, Ms. Bradshaw has been equally traumatized by the same system that for years ignored her as a placement option for her granddaughter, and the Cliffords have lost a child whom they love and consider their own."

Willms found that both Bradshaw and the Cliffords could meet P.S.'s needs, and that they both loved her. But while the Cliffords could provide ample financial resources, they could not provide P.S. with bloodlines, legacy, culture, and roots. The best interest of P.S., ruled Willms, was for her to be adopted by Bradshaw.

Midway through the hearing, Gertrude Buckanaga, the executive director of Upper Midwest, took the stand. She recalled a moment when P.S. was still living with the Cliffords and

(continued on page 57)

Soul Searching

Christian groups have jumped into the *Brackeen v. Haaland* fray, arguing that ICWA discriminates against Native children by prioritizing potential caretakers' Native heritage over their ability to provide for a child. Yet critics see that argument as merely the latest chapter in removing Native children from their communities to win more converts to Christianity. A few examples of the Christian groups and influencers opposing ICWA:

Christian Alliance for Indian Child Welfare

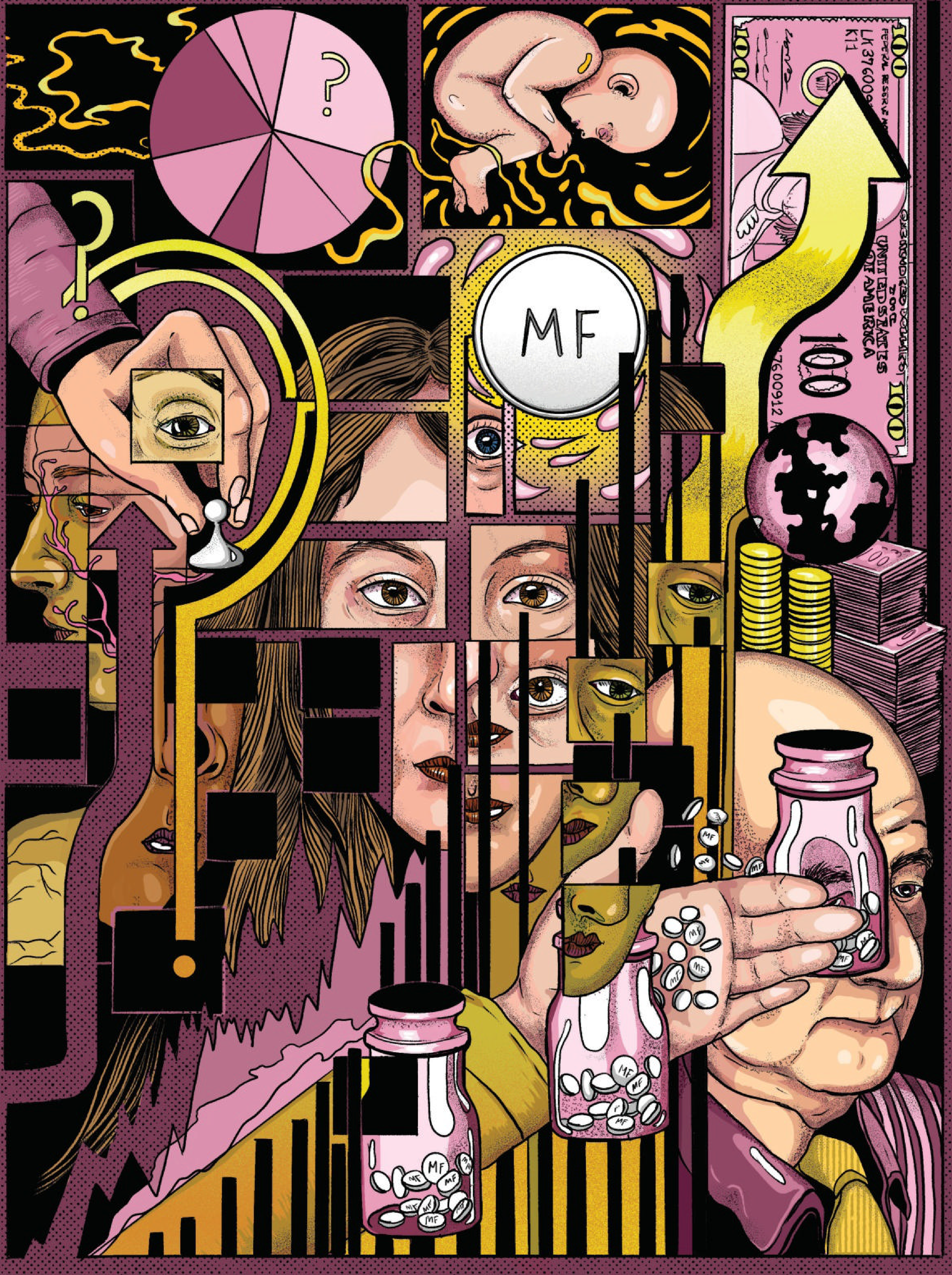
Founded in 2004, this group advocates on behalf of non-Indian families trying to adopt children of Native descent. Co-founder Elizabeth Morris wrote a 2012 book called *Dying in Indian Country*, which she describes as "the true story of a father who realized reservation life and welfare policies were destroying his family." CAICW's Facebook page regularly shares stories besmirching Native culture; a recent post cast doubt on the May 2021 discovery of the remains of Native children on the grounds of a Canadian residential school.

Nightlight Christian Adoptions

Since 1959, this evangelical adoption agency has promoted adoption as an alternative to abortion and a boon to Christianity. Nightlight waded into an ICWA battle in 2013, when the agency facilitated the adoption of a Cherokee girl by a white Christian family. A highly publicized custody battle between the adoptive parents and tribal leaders ensued, with evangelical activists staging rallies and circulating petitions to "Save Baby Veronica" from being removed from her adoptive family. The Supreme Court ultimately ruled in the adoptive parents' favor. In a current brochure about its faith-based mission, Nightlight states, "Adoption is one of the most effective ways to make disciples of all nations."

Allie Beth Stuckey and Naomi Schaefer Riley

Stuckey, a Christian influencer with 442,000 Instagram followers, devoted a recent episode of her *Relatable* podcast to ICWA. Her guest was Naomi Schaefer Riley, a fellow at the libertarian think tank American Enterprise Institute and author of the 2016 book *The New Trail of Tears: How Washington Is Destroying American Indians*. Riley argued that the US government's history of abuse of Native people is no longer relevant. Instead, she blamed Native poverty and suffering on modern moral failings. "Maybe it's the substance abuse," she said. "Maybe it's the high crime rates. Maybe it has nothing to do with the fact that your grandfather was forced to go to a boarding school by the American government." She claims that what "left-wing activists" really hope to achieve is "an Indian Child Welfare Act for Black children." ***—Kiera Butler***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The untold story of the private equity investors behind Mifeprex—

The Abortion Pill's Secret Money Men

and their escalating legal battle to cash in post-*Dobbs*

By Hannah Levintova
Illustrations by Eva Redamonti

In 1993, a group of activists rented a warehouse in suburban Westchester County, New York.

It was smaller than they'd hoped and had limited ventilation, but the two other locations they'd tried to rent belonged to universities and required jumping through too many bureaucratic hoops—the exact sort of paper trail this group was trying to avoid.

Led by renowned pro-choice activist Lawrence Lader, their goal was to replicate RU-486, the revolutionary abortion pill developed in the 1980s by French manufacturer Roussel-Uclaf—which was unwilling to navigate American abortion politics to bring the pill stateside. Lader's group, code-named ARM Research Council, set up shop just months after Dr. David Gunn was shot and killed outside his Florida clinic, the first US physician to be murdered by an anti-abortion activist. Perhaps unsurprisingly, no US manufacturer wanted to wade into the increasingly fraught abortion debate to bring the medication to American women, either. So with the help of lawyers and activists, Lader had smuggled RU-486 into the United States, and his group was going to try to reproduce it.

In their warehouse, they got to work building an underground drug laboratory, complete with a huge, customized ventilation hood, fire prevention devices, and specially designed sinks. The whole project "had the trappings of a CIA operation," Lader would later write. They figured out a system for replenishing their near-constant need for dry ice from a supplier 15 miles away, and crafted a strategy to avoid detection by anti-abortion groups, the garbage collector, and their landlord. If anyone asked what they were up to, the group—which included a doctor who lived 1,000 miles away and asked to go by Dr. X; a Columbia University chemist working for free; and two assistants—agreed on a cover story: They were working on a new treatment for cancer.

Meanwhile, Roussel and its parent company were in a drawn-out negotiation with a Manhattan-based reproductive health nonprofit, called the Population Council, over the official patent for RU-486. The same month that the French company finally agreed to give the Council the patent, Lader's secret lab announced that it had successfully developed its own copy of the drug, whose scientific name is mifepristone. The two groups knew of each other's work, and Lader had even reached out to the Population Council about collaborating, but the Council had demurred.

Lader's group knew American women could not wait the many years it would take for the Council to arrange an official manufacturing operation with full approval from the Food and Drug Administration. So, it got its own permission from the FDA to conduct limited testing, which would allow it to start distributing small batches of the drug to a network of 10 clinics. There, patients could get both mifepristone and misoprostol, a common ulcer drug, which, when taken in tandem, can cause a medication abortion. For the few who were able to try it, it was an emotional and physical relief: It meant they could have an abortion privately and without a vacuum aspiration machine, whose suction "feels like you're getting the life sucked out of you," as one early mifepristone recipient described it to the *Boston Globe*.

All the while, the Council was working to find a manufacturer willing to make the drug, win full FDA authorization, and sell it across America.

When the FDA finally approved mifepristone seven years later, the Council's distribution venture, which came to be called Danco Labs, was ready to go. Within two months, the drug was shipped out to doctors. At the clinics brave enough to be early adopters, women began showing up from farther and farther away; in some places the medicine was double the cost of a surgical abortion, but that hardly seemed to matter. By 2020, the pill had become the most popular way to get an abortion in the United States.

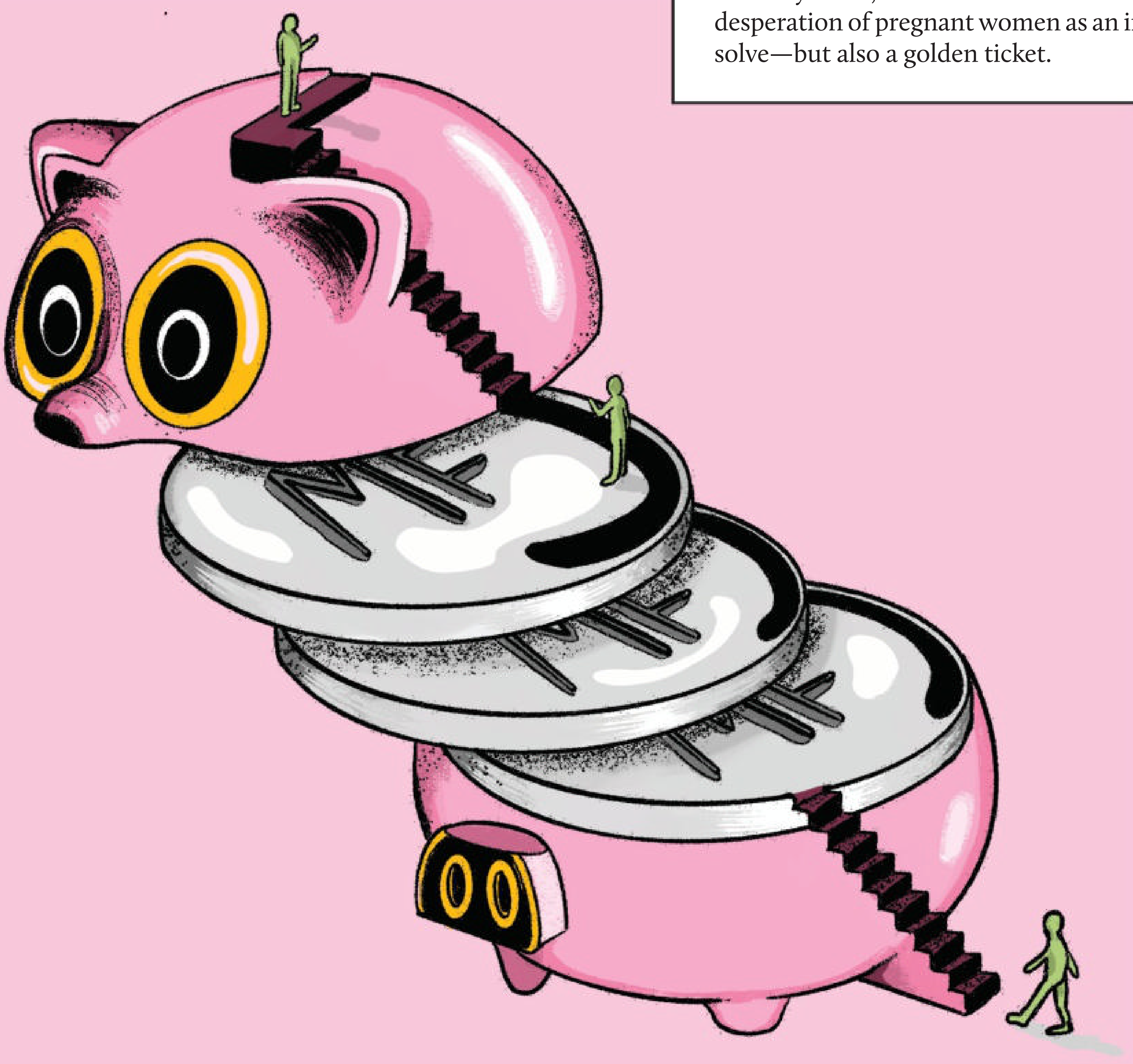
Over the last two decades, mifepristone's dramatic origin story has made its way into books and the pages of the *New York Times*. But the tale of who funded this effort to legally bring it to women across the country, and what benefits the funders might reap from their investments, has been mostly kept quiet. This was in part because the 1990s were the apex of anti-abortion violence, so investors required secrecy. It was also because the funding sources seemed like a minor plot point in a project that had the potential to transform reproductive health care for millions.

"I don't think anybody thinks they're going to make a lot of money," Peg Yorkin, one of the activists crucial to the US mifepristone campaign, told the *Los Angeles Times* when the pill became available. “We’re just happy that it’s going to be happening.”

But the small group of investors who backed the Population Council’s drive to manufacture and distribute the drug since its earliest days have made a lot of money on the mifepristone business—tens of millions of dollars, according to court filings. Their windfall has come through a byzantine corporate structure set up in the 1990s by a private equity fund, now called MedApproach Holdings, to allow investors to pour money into Danco Labs—until 2019 the only US retailer of mifepristone—without disclosing their identities. As states have imposed ever-stricter limits on abortion access, their investments have generated hefty returns.

On the heels of the Supreme Court’s ruling in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization* last June, undoing the federal right to abortion—and the FDA’s announcement, in January, that retail pharmacies can now sell abortion pills—these investors are likely to earn even more, as medication abortion becomes the only option for millions of women living in the 26 states where abortion is now illegal or severely restricted. The potential is so promising that two of the primary investors have engaged in a bitter court battle to take control of the investment, and Danco itself.

Their story has a dizzying plot that involves Cayman Islands shell companies, LLCs named after racehorses, a shadowy priest, a disbarred attorney, and a finance whiz behind an infamous Wall Street hedge fund collapse. The legal battle, which has been fought in three states and cost millions in attorneys’ fees, shows how investors have come to view the desperation of pregnant women as an important problem to solve—but also a golden ticket.



IN 1986, A NORTH CAROLINA lawyer named Joseph Pike purchased one of the earliest manufacturers of intrauterine devices for $1.1 million. The company, Finishing Enterprises Inc., was making IUDs for another business called GynoPharma. At the time, GynoPharma wasn't selling IUDs in the United States—American women shunned them after the Dalkon Shield, a different IUD, was found to cause severe injuries in the '80s. Its copper IUDs were primarily being purchased by governments and NGOs for distribution in developing nations, but Pike spent the next five years helping to bring this IUD, the Paragard, to the United States. After it hit the market, he sold FEI for a reported $65 million—an astounding return of more than 5,800 percent. "It was a good play for me," he says.

A multimillionaire at just 41, Pike ditched his lawyer job and moved to La Jolla, one of San Diego's most exclusive neighborhoods, to "enjoy life." He took up golf and played as often as he felt like it. But soon Pike heard from the Population Council about a business proposition: It wanted to develop and market medication abortion in the United States. At that time, advocates were flying lobbyists to Europe and picketing outside the New Jersey office of the French pill's parent company to get them to sell the drug in America. As Pike saw it, it was another opportunity to make some real money—and do some good along the way.

Pike was the Council's go-to because they'd worked together on the copper IUD. The Council had developed it and then granted GynoPharma the license, and it collected royalties as Pike successfully built up the IUD business and sold it. Pike had proved himself to be a businessman who could breathe life, and dollars, into a controversial women's health product. The Council gave him the exclusive right to sell mifepristone in the US and tasked him with drumming up investors.

Typically, drugs in the United States are not funded by private individuals. Instead, the federal government finances initial research, while later stages of development are paid for by pharmaceutical companies. Venture capitalists and private equity investors usually only get involved in drugs developed to treat rare diseases—those that affect fewer than 200,000 people per year—because pharma companies are unlikely to invest in these typically less-profitable treatments. But mifepristone was far from a "rare disease" drug—in the 1990s, about 1.5 million American women were having abortions annually. (That number has since come down to just under a million, thanks to the growing availability of contraceptives.) Yet the controversy surrounding mifepristone meant that neither the government nor mainstream companies would go anywhere near it.

In 1994, Pike got to work, traveling the country with Susan Allen, a doctor and abortion provider he'd brought on to be the face of the abortion pill effort. Pike recalls that they spent their time pitching wealthy liberals, including Susan Buffett, Gloria Vanderbilt, a George Soros representative, and a handful of other celebrities. His fundraising overlapped with the O.J. Simpson murder trial, and Pike says he even met with one of Simpson's defense lawyers, Bob Shapiro. Pike won't say which, if any, of these people invested in the project, but he estimates that altogether there were about 50 pitch meetings.

One of the investors who did sign on was Greg Hawkins, a veteran of the major investment bank Salomon Brothers, who was then helping run the hedge fund Long-Term Capital Management. (Hawkins did not comment for this story.) Pike met Hawkins in New York City in 1995 and told him what he'd told everyone else: To protect investors' privacy, he would craft a corporate structure that would be based offshore and involve a slew of sub-entities—in essence, a Russian nesting doll of holding companies that would quietly fund the mifepristone effort. The project did not have FDA authorization yet, which meant there was no immediate way to bring in revenue. But eventually, they would pay back their investors, and then some. Hawkins decided he wanted in.

Pike set about creating a dizzying chain of intermediate companies registered around the world. First, he filed paperwork to create Danco Laboratories Inc. as a Cayman Islands company, also registered in Delaware. (Danco was named after Pike's son.) Then he listed an intermediate company in California, Danco LP. He also registered another intermediate company, ND Management, in the Cayman Islands.

Each entity controlled the next one: ND Management oversaw Danco LP, which owned Danco Labs, the company that would actually sell the abortion drug whose backers this tangle of entities was set up to obscure. The secrecy was paramount, given the threat of reputational or financial consequences—or worse—for anyone publicly tied to the project; anti-abortion violence was continuing to escalate. Extremists murdered abortion providers in Florida and Massachusetts, and anti-abortion groups threatened a boycott of more than 70 medications made by RU-486's manufacturer, Roussel. Pike, who'd been identified in news stories, got death threats himself.

Pike had already found someone to help build this financial vehicle: an experienced health care financier from Nashville named Brad Daniel. Daniel had started two biotech hedge funds, as well as a private equity fund, called Bio-Pharm Investments, that specialized in providing seed money to pharmaceutical ventures. Like Pike, Daniel would later recall that his motivations were twofold: He believed in the social benefits of mifepristone, and in the enormous financial potential. (Daniel did not comment for this story.)

Daniel created a fund, MedApproach, where investors would plunk their money in Danco's mifepristone business. His private equity fund, Bio-Pharm, would oversee MedApproach, receiving a 1 percent management fee and 20 percent of all profit distributions that MedApproach's investors got from their stakes in Danco's business.

All this was happening when private equity investing was becoming in vogue. It began in the 1980s, when a generation of shrewd financiers popularized a type of business takeover, called a leveraged buyout, that secured private equity's status as a new place for wealthy investors to grow their money. They had also kicked off a broader philosophical shift—one where the main value of a business lies less in the benefit a product offered customers and other stakeholders, and more in the financial returns extracted for its shareholders.

By the 1990s, when the mifepristone venture was getting off the ground, this new attitude had propelled private equity investment into new sectors, like health care, technology, and pharmaceuticals. The pill presented an obvious financial opportunity: the rare sort of drug that they'd never have trouble selling, for a condition that would never cease to exist.

Within two years, Pike and Daniel found a handful of willing investors who together put more than $13 million into MedApproach. Hawkins was the largest investor funding the Russian nesting doll of financial entities, pitching in $1.5 million, so that, by 1996, he owned three-quarters of MedApproach. Over the next two years, he loaned the Danco project an additional $4 million, according to his declarations in court.

But then the project hit a roadblock. The Population Council discovered in 1997 that Pike had an unsavory history that they worried could tank the abortion pill project just as it was in the middle of clinical trials and its campaign for FDA approval. The prior year, as he'd been ramping up the mifepristone investments, Pike had pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor forgery charge in North Carolina, tied to a 1985 real estate deal. He'd gotten a suspended two-year sentence, 18 months of probation, and a fine. He had also been stripped of his law license.

(Pike explains that the charge came from a disgruntled former client he'd once helped buy land. When the client wanted to get rid of it years later, Pike couldn't help because he had retired from practicing law. The client claimed Pike had misrepresented facts; Pike says he pleaded guilty to make the case go away.)

The Population Council wanted the mifepristone project to be squeaky clean. If Pike stayed on, they felt that years of work, the $13.3 million in investments he'd secured, and FDA approval could all be in danger. Keeping him involved in the project, they said, would mean that "another weapon with which to attack [the abortion pill] will be furnished to its ideological opponents."

> “To protect investors, Pike crafted a Russian nesting doll of holding companies that would quietly fund the mifepristone effort.”

IT TOOK A LAWSUIT to get Pike off the project. As part of his exit, the Population Council insisted that the investors Pike had found have the chance to leave, since the Council could no longer guarantee the promises Pike had made to them. Spooked by the disarray and the fact that Danco still did not have government approval to sell its only product, many investors opted to pull their funds. But Hawkins stayed in and paid $3.5 million to buy out most of Pike's investment. Daniel also stayed involved, securing more control over the company and further compensation that would amount to hundreds of thousands annually. (Pike, meanwhile, fought to keep a 25 percent stake, $1.5 million in consulting fees, and a portion of the future profits on the shares he'd given up, capped at $21 million.) Hawkins also pledged up to $13.7 million to buy up shares ditched by other investors, potentially giving him a majority of the entire investment.

Three months later, in July 1998, Hawkins invited Daniel

> “Hawkins said he knew a Catholic priest who wanted to invest in medication abortion but required absolute anonymity.”

to visit him at his home in Saratoga, New York. Over lunch at the Saratoga Race Course's private club, he told Daniel that something was “terribly wrong.” His hedge fund was having liquidity issues and would have little or no additional funds to invest in MedApproach—meaning he would not be able to cover the nearly $14 million commitment he'd made to buy out investors.

Hawkins asked to transfer his existing stake to his wife, Sharon—to protect himself, his family, and that investment from whatever might come next at his hedge fund. Daniel agreed. Later, Hawkins told Daniel that he would solicit other investors to cover the millions he'd committed to MedApproach but now could not come up with.

Over the next two months, Hawkins' hedge fund, Long-Term Capital Management, collapsed. Famed on Wall Street for sophisticated math that delivered huge returns, it lost billions in a matter of weeks, thanks to a mix of events that included Russia's default on a chunk of its Treasury debt, which LTCM had heavily invested in. At its peak, LTCM had controlled 5 percent of assets on the global market, so its downfall roiled the worldwide financial system. Soon, the Federal Reserve stepped in to organize a $3.5 billion bailout financed by the leading Wall Street banks.

Amid all that, Daniel and Hawkins began having weekly talks to figure out how to move forward with the mifepristone investment. The buyout of the original investors would wrap up in the summer of 1999, and Hawkins was scouting new funders.

In these calls, Hawkins told Daniel about an idea: He'd created five different LLCs, several named after his racehorses, where new investors could put money for the abortion pill project while staying unidentified. One LLC in particular, Shiroyama, he said, required extra care. According to Daniel, Hawkins said that he had heard from a Catholic priest who wanted to invest in medication abortion but required absolute anonymity. So sensitive was this investment that Hawkins needed to entice the priest with a $320,000 sweetener. He asked Daniel to move that sum from his wife's stake into the Shiroyama LLC—forfeiting some of the Hawkinses' own investment in the deal and passing it to the priest to entice the clergyman to invest further. By approving the transfer, Daniel said he was also losing out financially: Less of the money invested this way would end up in his pocket, because the LLC would not have to pay his private equity fund's 1 percent management fee (or 20 percent of any profits it accrued). But it seemed that both Daniel and Hawkins were giving something up to help the project get on its feet, in hopes of reaping the rewards later.

After the sweetener, the priest seemed to come through—according to Daniel, Shiroyama LLC invested just shy of $950,000 over the next year. Later on, Hawkins asked Daniel to move another $1.7 million of his wife's interest into three of the LLCs, as additional enticements for more investors he was drumming up. Yet another LLC plowed $700,000 into the project.

The LLC investments came just in time: On September 28, 2000, the FDA officially approved Mifeprex, the commercial name for Danco's mifepristone pill. These investors' financial bet was finally on track to pay dividends.

WITHIN THREE YEARS, the Danco project had earned enough on Mifeprex to start repaying investors. Several Supreme Court cases soon made it easier for states to enact abortion restrictions, an opportunity that conservative states took up with gusto—sending ever more women looking for the discreet pill they could take at home. By 2010, about a quarter of early abortions were done with mifepristone, and Danco had paid everyone back. Now that everyone had been made whole, it was time to finally start making a profit, which was great news for both investors and Daniel's private equity fund, now named MedApproach Holdings, which would get somewhere between 10 and 20 percent of profits made by investors, as well as the management fees it had deferred while the project got off the ground.

Daniel contacted Hawkins to get clearer information on all of the investors so he could pay them their portions of the profits. He sent multiple emails, heard nothing for five months, and eventually mailed him a letter. That's when Hawkins called Daniel, who recalls Hawkins angrily reiterating that Shiroyama's investor was a priest who required absolute confidentiality. “You are never going to find out who he is,” he said, “and it is none of your business!” In a second call, Daniel says Hawkins offered to pay him money instead

of providing any documentation revealing the identities of the investors he'd brought in. (A source with knowledge of the proceedings says that Hawkins never made this offer.)

That started a snowball of suspicion, and within a matter of months, Daniel filed a lawsuit against Hawkins in federal court. The proceedings led to a stunning revelation: There never was a priest. The money that had passed through the Shiroyama LLC had been from the purportedly broke Hawkinses. (In federal court documents, Hawkins maintained that he never called the investor a priest; rather, he had merely said he was a religious friend. This friend had planned to invest but backed out due to his faith and fear of anti-abortion reprisals, forcing Hawkins to use his own money to cover the investment. The friend filed a declaration in court supporting Hawkins' account.) The whole thing looked like a scheme by the Hawkinses to expand their investment in medication abortion and reap its returns—while paying less in management fees and sharing fewer profits. Daniel claimed that the demise of LTCM had been a hit on the Hawkinses' wealth, and the tale of the secret, abortion-supporting priest was a way to make some of it back. The Hawkinses disagreed, saying they'd never misled Daniel, and that their investment in the Shiroyama LLC was aboveboard and never intended as a profitable runaround. Eventually, Daniel and the Hawkinses opted to settle for an undisclosed amount.

Both parties have made a fortune on Mifeprex. Documents filed by Daniel as part of a different lawsuit say that the Hawkinses' investment in MedApproach has made a return on investment of 228.79 percent. The actual dollar amount has been fastidiously redacted in all the case's legal filings, but based on the Hawkinses' disclosures of their total investment in the mifepristone project—between $9 million and $11 million—their earnings would come to between $11.5 million and $14.1 million. (A source familiar with

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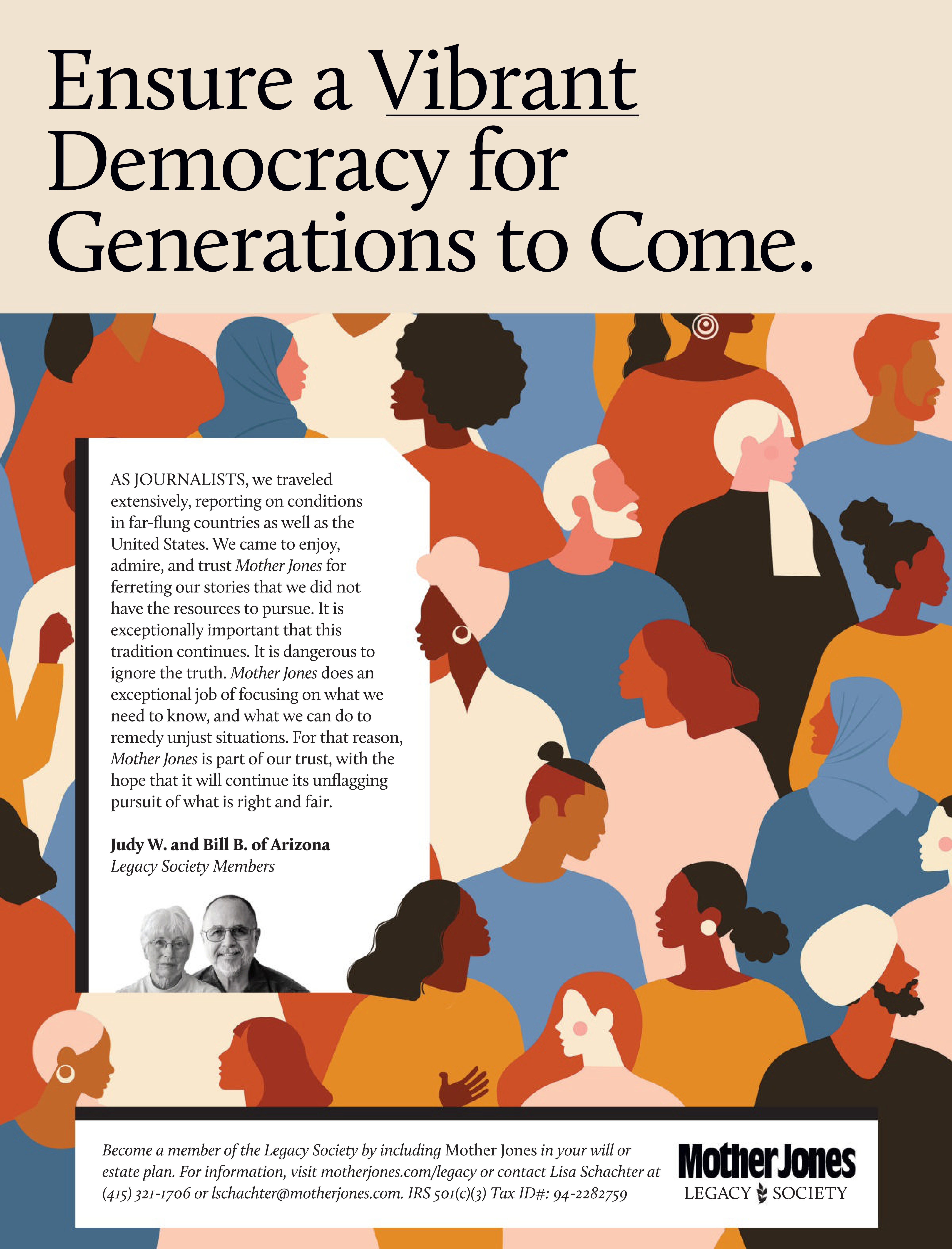

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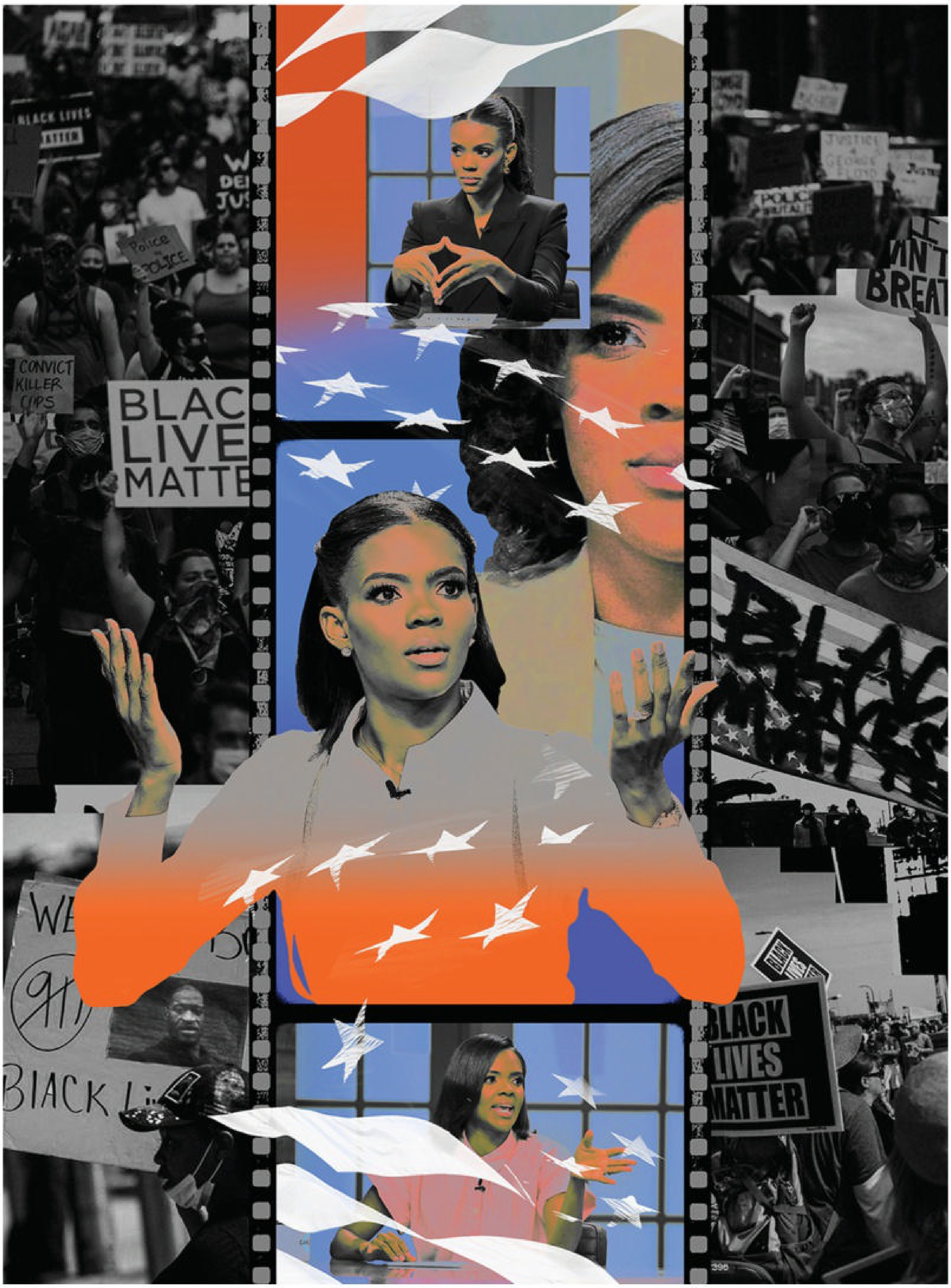
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LIGHTS, CAMERA, PROPAGANDA

How right-wing provocateurs like Candace Owens are weaponizing documentary filmmaking

BY EAMON WHALEN

ILLUSTRATIONS BY CHRIS BURNETT

LAST OCTOBER, Kanye West appeared on the popular podcast *Drink Champs*, a free-flowing interview show hosted by the rapper N.O.R.E. and DJ EFN—think *The Joe Rogan Experience* for rappers.

In the interview, Ye said he'd been "screwed by the Jewish media." That "Jewish Zionists" were responsible for crude tabloid stories about the mother of his children, Kim Kardashian. That Planned Parenthood was the Holocaust for Black America. And it was on *Drink Champs* that Ye proclaimed George Floyd's cause of death an overdose. "They hit him with the fentanyl," he said. "If you look, the guy's knee wasn't even on his neck like that."

If you paid attention to the 2021 trial of "the guy," former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin, you might recognize this argument as nearly identical to the defense proffered by Chauvin's attorneys. But West cited another source: a documentary by the right-wing media provocateur Candace Owens, titled *The Greatest Lie Ever Sold: George Floyd and the Rise of BLM*.

Owens played a Rasputin-like role in Ye's latest meltdown. Their friendship goes as far back as 2018, when Kanye first donned a MAGA hat and said slavery was "a choice." Before the *Drink Champs* episode, he appeared with Owens at Paris Fashion Week wearing shirts he designed that read "White Lives Matter." West also was prepared to buy Parler, the fledgling right-wing social media platform headed by Owens' husband, though the deal reportedly fell through.

Because of all this, one might conclude that Ye is uniquely vulnerable to the delusions of Owens' documentary. But that ignores an emerging cottage industry dedicated to bolstering such claims. Ye attended Owens' premiere in Nashville, a city the doc's producer and distributor, the Daily Wire, hopes to turn into, as the *New York Times* put it, "Hollywood for conservatives." The right thinks that it can pitch its ideas through documentaries to many more people than Ye—and make money doing it.

The Daily Wire was created in 2015 in Los Angeles by right-wing pundit Ben Shapiro and filmmaker Jeremy Boreing as a conservative, personality-driven news outlet with Hollywood glitz. In summer 2022, they launched their own streaming service called the DailyWire+. The company has released a few feature films, including the school-shooter drama *Run Hide Fight*, but it has made its biggest splash with hard-hitting documentaries that claim to expose the evil lurking behind liberal shibboleths. *The Greatest Lie Ever Sold* follows on the work of another Daily Wire personality, Matt Walsh, who stars in the anti-trans documentary *What Is a Woman*? Another installment in the company's culture war series is *Fauci Unmasked*, a three-part documentary hosted by former actor and conservative writer Michael Knowles.

Sleek and professionally produced, the company's feature-length documentaries make misleading claims about hot-button issues. They are ready-made to refute critics hazy on facts. They reframe information selectively, hoping, amid the flurry of the news cycle, that you lost the plot. The format itself lends an ersatz air of authority. "I was watching that Candace Owens documentary—documentaries are fucking dangerous," comedian Andrew Schulz joked in a widely viewed video. "They should be illegal."

Boreing is well versed in this kind of thing. According to *Vanity Fair*, he was a consultant for talk radio host Dennis Prager's eponymous outlet, PragerU. The service has become one of the most successful right-wing propaganda projects in recent memory by smuggling conservative politics—via ostensibly apolitical, credentialed experts—into simple, visually appealing videos, ideal for social media.

This Trojan horse approach is reminiscent of the "fair and balanced" marketing gimmick that Fox News pioneered. As the writer and filmmaker Jen Senko points out in her book and documentary, *The Brainwashing of My Dad*, the rise of conservative media was key in radicalizing a generation of Americans, the proverbial Meemaw and Peepaw obsessed with Hannity. It's worth noting that many of us are more like those stereotypical grandparents than we'd care to admit—susceptible to flashy agitprop, too.

The Daily Wire is betting on it. To capitalize, producers are borrowing techniques from lefty filmmakers. "It makes sense that they'd eventually catch on," said Senko of the right's move to documentaries. "I think that they saw the way it educated us." As Malcolm Harris points out in a *New York* magazine review of *What Is a Woman?*, Walsh employs a faux innocence and deadpan bluntness reminiscent of certain *Daily Show* correspondents. Owens' crusading approach, meanwhile, brings to mind the muckraking of Michael Moore. Both posture as outsiders asking questions the (liberal) establishment doesn't want to answer.

The Greatest Lie Ever Sold even begins with a paraphrased Malcolm X quote: "The media is the most powerful entity on earth. They have the power to make the innocent guilty and to make the

PAGE 51: GETTY (10); ABOVE: GETTY (6)

guilty innocent." Despite years as a media firebrand, Owens doesn't seem to think she is part of the equation. Yet after stipulating early in the film that "nobody deserves to die," she spends the next hour trying to prove that Floyd did.

OWENS' DOCUMENTARY TOGGLES between on-the-ground reporting, interviews with talking heads, and editorializing in her own confessional, straight-to-camera monologues. Her mission is to exonerate Chauvin by damning Floyd. She argues that because of this "lie"—that Floyd was murdered—the resulting nationwide protests were a farce. (Owens has trouble sticking with her argument, so she has a backup theory as to why Floyd deserved to die: He resisted arrest and had a criminal record.)

Like most political propaganda, *The Greatest Lie* builds its case on lies by omission. The most effective false narratives rest on kernels of truth, facts that are exploited and decontextualized. For those who felt the racial justice protests of 2020 were untoward in some way, the film offers a misleading but semi-coherent narrative. And while the target audience seems to be Fox News–addled elders, it also aims at a much broader crowd.

We hear from Ron Martinelli, a forensic criminologist who tells us that Floyd's cause of death was an overdose, not asphyxiation. It's true that Floyd had fentanyl in his system at the time of his death, but the film ignores the painstaking trial testimony of pulmonologist Dr. Martin Tobin, who pinpointed the precise moment that Floyd died.

Like just about every talking head in the film—whether former Minneapolis cops, legal analysts, or Owens' local tour guides—Martinelli is presented as a straight shooter with "no dog in this fight," he says. To accept that, you have to ignore the anti–Black Lives Matter book he published in 2016, and forget that he told NPR at the time that BLM is "a Black nationalist revolutionary Marxist movement that is tied into a much larger international movement referred to as One World One Struggle."

Breaking the perceived liberal grip on mainstream pop culture is a longtime goal of the right. It's why Andrew Breitbart—the man credited for bringing Boreing and Shapiro together—was based in Los Angeles. And why Breitbart acolyte Steve Bannon, before he was Trump's chief strategist and White House adviser, produced and directed political documentaries, including films about the tea party, Sarah Palin, and Occupy Wall Street.

The Daily Wire seems to have found its ideal moment. Americans are increasingly hostile to mainstream media. In a *New York Times* poll last October, 59 percent of registered voters deemed the mainstream media a "major threat to democracy." And a Gallup poll suggested that only 34 percent of Americans, a near record low, have a "great deal" or "fair amount" of confidence in the media to deliver the news "fully, accurately and fairly." These conditions present a political opportunity—and an untapped market.

In 2020, Amanda Milius, daughter of one of the screenwriters of *Apocalypse Now*, directed *The Plot Against the President*, an anti-Russiagate documentary about Devin Nunes and Trump. By 2023, it was still one of Amazon's top 20 bestselling documentaries, ahead of Ken Burns' *Baseball*. A Big Lie documentary called *Rigged: The Zuckerberg Funded Plot to Defeat Donald Trump*, by Citizens United Productions, premiered at Mar-a-Lago last April.

The next month, Trump's Florida resort hosted another Big Lie screening, this one for *2000 Mules*, a widely debunked film that aims to prove the 2020 election was stolen through illegal "ballot harvesting." It was the latest release from the godfather of the genre, Dinesh D'Souza, a former Ronald

Reagan policy analyst who has written books about how Black Americans' claims of racism are exaggerated, how English colonization helped the people of India, and how the 2016 Democratic Party platform echoed the Third Reich. His 2012 documentary, *2016: Obama's America*, is the sixth-highest-grossing documentary of all time, according to Box Office Mojo. Though less of a box office hit, *Mules* still struck a chord. Its following was so fervent that in some cases it turned into a sort of litmus test for the hardcore MAGA base going into the 2022 midterm elections.

But *2000 Mules* also became a problem for conservatives, and it marks a potential pivot point for the future of right-wing documentaries. Just how far are film producers willing to stretch the truth? D'Souza claimed that Newsmax canceled his *2000 Mules* interview, and he accused Tucker Carlson's producers of trying to prevent any mention of the film on air. Then there is Shapiro, who released a 16-minute reaction video to *Mules*, saying its conclusions "are not justified by the premises of the film. There are a bunch of dots to be connected, and maybe they will be, but they haven't been."

This is where the Daily Wire model breaks from D'Souza. Boreing and Shapiro are not so focused on preaching to the converted (though they do); instead, they want to use the culture wars as entertainment. With a bit more fidelity to the facts, more skillful filmmaking, and extensive, well-funded promotion on major social networks and platforms like Instagram and YouTube, the Daily Wire documentaries, as Harris wrote, appear to be just "asking questions." And yet, one can always guess the answer beforehand.

OWENS' FILM CONTAINS one moment that is close to a "scoop." Early on, she introduces us to Alvin Manago and Theresa Scott, George Floyd's roommates at the time of his death. (Owens admits she misled them about what the film was trying to prove.)

Manago and Scott are kind and welcoming. Manago met Floyd in rehab, and then they worked security together at a Minneapolis restaurant and nightclub. We get a tour of Floyd's bedroom. Scott shows the verses Floyd highlighted in his personal Bible. We learn that, a few weeks before he died, Floyd predicted his death. Scott remembers Floyd telling her, "I do whatever the police tell me to do because they're looking to kill a big brother like me."

"So when it happened, it was eerie," adds Manago. "That was one of his fears."

In another documentary, this would be a chilling reminder of the psychological toll of police violence on Black men like Floyd. For Owens, it was the perfect moment to attempt to provoke the couple. "I'm sure you've seen the whole tape by now," Owens begins, speaking over footage from Floyd's last moments. "Do you ever look at it and go, 'Man, I wish he would've taken his own advice?'"

[redacted]

The right thinks it can pitch its ideas through documentaries—and make money doing it.

Scott quietly answers yes. And the film cuts away before we hear any more.

It is difficult to convey how disturbing it is to watch this attempt to get Floyd's roommates to blame him for his own murder.

This kind of malevolence disguised as truth-seeking animates the entire movie. What seems to eat at Owens the most is that so many people felt such compassion for Floyd. She genuinely can't believe that millions of Americans took to the streets on behalf of a flawed human being, a stranger. This solidarity seems foreign to her. It can only be explained by manipulation.

In her third act, Owens presents a conspiracy centering around the Black Lives Matter Global Network. There are no big gotcha moments in Owens' exposé that have not already been reported by more mainstream outlets: that BLM Global Network co-founder and former executive director Patrisse Cullors used donation funds to covertly purchase a $6 million house whose purpose is unclear; that Cullors put her family on the payroll; that the group's overall financial picture lacks the transparency expected of a prominent nonprofit organization leading a social movement. In what would be the climax, Owens visits the Los Angeles home of Cullors and stands outside the fence. She is told to leave.

As she goes through the group's tax forms with a fine-tooth comb, Owens is much less focused on the substantive criticisms leveled at it by other BLM chapters and parents of the movement's martyrs. In a nod to Walsh and the Daily Wire extended universe, Owens reserves her outrage for the revelation that BLM Global Network donated money to trans-rights organizations.

That BLM Global's alleged improprieties might come off as a revelation to viewers is partly a product of a journalistic failure—one that feeds the right-wing media claim that the liberals are lying to you. A dearth of good-faith reporting such as that of Sean K. Campbell—whose *New York* magazine series on BLM Global Network was a rare, thorough exposé of a progressive group by a national magazine—gave right-leaning outlets like the *Washington Examiner* and the *New York Post* the chance to break some of those stories. Which, in turn, gave Owens an opportunity to exploit.

The kernel of truth undergirding *The Greatest Lie* is that there are fissures within the racial justice movement. That people sometimes exploit political success for personal profit. That the reality of George Floyd the man has at times been superseded by the symbol he has become. None of this rationalizes his murder, or explains it. Yet that is Owens' goal. "The real story is a story of addiction," she says during the film's final moments. "It's a story of a man who overdosed…You were all lied to. That's the truth."

In the end, Owens is doing exactly what she claims she's exposing: lying to profit off a Black man's untimely death in order to build a brand. It's just a right-wing one. ■

MOTHER TONGUE

AUSTERITY

How a conservative rationale for brutal budget cuts became an explanation of its consequences

BY RUQAIYAH ZAROOK

THE CUTS HAVE come even for the word itself. “Austerity” is a cornerstone of conservatism—a catch-all term for limiting government spending to promote capitalist growth—and yet the expression seems to have disappeared from deficit hawks’ speeches. “I call it balancing the budget,” said German Chancellor Angela Merkel in 2013. “Everyone else is using this term ‘austerity.’ That makes it sound like something truly evil.”

Yes. That aura of “evil” is perhaps why writers, especially on the left, return to it again and again. As economists Clara Mattei and Sam Salour argue, “austerity” is a helpful word to describe what the failed policies of neoliberalism have done since the 1970s across the world: subdued the working class by driving up unemployment, keeping wages stagnant, and reducing welfare spending. The word connects everyday issues to structural decay caused by a fiscal playbook. Austerity is, as economic journalist Doug Henwood has argued, “causing America to rot.”

Historically, the word gave market cruelties a whiff of moralism. Drawing on the ancient Greek *austeros* (“what makes the tongue dry”), it offered a religious ring to financial asceticism. It was how one could argue that cutting social spending was a path to self-reliance. But over the last decade, there has been a shift. Too many people have lived under the actual policies. Austerity has moved from being a rationale for slashing government budgets to a damning critique of the consequences. In the reversal, you can see what many think of living under this anti–social spending project: It sucks.

The moral project of austerity has its beginnings in John Locke’s *Second Treatise*. Written in 17th-century England—a time when, as economist Mark Blyth notes, “public debt [was] the debt of kings” and rulers invoked God as a justification for appropriating wealth as they pleased. Locke found this arbitrary. He argued, in his now-famous philosophical framework, that governments should primarily safeguard private property. To undermine the monarchy’s influence, Locke preached limited government. Freedom, he explained, through austerity.

But this Lockean card is regularly overplayed. The modern rhetoric of austerity politics has firmer roots in the Confederate resistance to Reconstruction. As W.E.B. Du Bois documented in *Black Reconstruction*, white planter elites pushed back on new multiracial governments made up of Black people and poor white people by proclaiming them irresponsible, corrupt, and plagued by extravagant spending. For much of American political history, a repudiation of the underclass was inherent in the push for small government. Austerity offered up economic hardship as a disciplinary tool.

This cruelty to the poor can be easily seen through Andrew Mellon, Herbert Hoover’s Treasury secretary, who said in the face of the Great Depression that the downturn would rid the system of “rottenness” and lead people to “live a more moral life.” Or Mitt Romney, who in 2012 said 47 percent of Americans were “takers” not “makers,” and told an audience of the wealthy that his “job is not to worry about those people.” Here, freedom is weaponized as a way to abandon the poor.

In the years following the Great Recession of 2008, austerity took divergent routes in the United States. On the left, Occupy Wall Street argued that the real corruption was our inability to “tax the rich” (remember the chants?) in order to fund a safety net for the poor. On the right, the tea party depicted social spending as theft. The left won some followers, but the right won power in Congress. In 2012, a series of spending cuts—predominantly in health, education, and social services—were implemented, and a new “age of austerity” was born.

Yet after living under austerity policies for more than a decade, polls show Americans are tired of the unequal discipline. They want the government to ensure their basic needs: food, housing, public education, and clean air and water. The movement for a $15 minimum wage has gained momentum among major companies, many cities, and some states. The right’s promise of a moral high ground gained from thrift seems not to be as appealing anymore. A decade of spending cuts has made “austerity” sound a lot less like salvation and more like hell. ■

TRIBORO

NEVER BEEN KISSED

(continued from page 21)

problem by making women second-class citizens who have no right to refuse to marry them, have sex with them, and bear their children." (Full disclosure: Mantyla is my colleague at Right Wing Watch, a nonprofit project.)

Late last year, Fuentes' women-hating fans helped him make his way into the arms of some of the most prominent aggrieved men in America—first Kanye West, and then Donald Trump. In meeting with Trump, Fuentes may have been seeking the former president's seal of approval—an endorsement of a man who not only has been accused of sexual assault 19 times and who bragged about grabbing women "by the pussy," but whose only electoral win was fueled by sexist and misogynistic messaging deployed against Hillary Clinton. The strategy was explicit and may have been backed up by a deliberate targeting effort: A whistleblower from Cambridge Analytica, a company the campaign hired to find voters, said it had worked to identify "unmarried straight white dudes who couldn't get laid," adding that campaign CEO Steve Bannon saw them as prone to "conspiratorial thinking" and easy to manipulate.

Neither Bannon nor Fuentes responded to requests to comment for this story. After an online version published, Fuentes used it to reemphasize his misogynist bona fides: The story, he wrote on Telegram, is "ridiculous," because "I'm not 'making overtures' to sexist men. I *am* a sexist man."

Despite his vitriol, Fuentes is a somewhat controversial figure among factions of the incel community—mainly because of unseemly technicalities. Some have questioned Fuentes' identification with them because of suggestions by former associates that he is gay. Others have fixated on his admission that he once kissed a girl in high school, suggesting that his celibacy is voluntary. (He has said that he has opted to forgo sex because "I'm choosing instead to lead a historical right-wing movement.")

Whatever skepticism may exist on that front, it has done little to blunt his appeal to incels. As Fuentes' statement about his own choice suggests, to resonate with them, you don't necessarily need to personally and perfectly embody involuntary celibacy. A shared embrace of high-powered misogyny, of the idea that women are irrational and deserve violence, is enough. ■

THE WEBSITE FROM HELL

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request the removal of personal information from our search results, including doxing content," but noted some things still get through.

Wu has tried to get Google to delist her Kiwi Farms results. "I've had five or six meetings with them," she told me last spring. "It's not something that they've taken serious action on."

After Cloudflare dropped Kiwi Farms, Google responded to questions I'd sent a few days earlier. The company told me that since some of the information on Kiwi Farms might be factual, it is in the public interest to keep it in search results—even if other parts of the content are incorrect. And, in any case, a company spokesperson noted, "Google is not best positioned to make that determination" of truthfulness.

Kiwi Farms victims have had no better luck getting law enforcement to take action. "I've talked to the FBI. They'll all do diddly-squat," Darling said. "Law enforcement's view is that you could live a normal life if you were willing to live a normal life, a.k.a. go back into the closet."

When someone mailed Darling feces, she remembered it was a bureaucratic hell to attempt to report it to authorities. "We informed the police. The police said, 'Call the postmaster general.' The postmaster general said, 'Call the FBI.' The FBI said, 'Call the postmaster general.'"

Fong-Jones had a similar experience. "I contacted NYPD. I showed them Kiwi Farms threads. I said, 'I'm afraid someone is going to SWAT me,' and they were like 'Get off the internet.'"

Getting local police or even federal agents to understand that entire websites of internet strangers are conspiring to cyberbully someone into suicide is a tall task. "I think that it's easier for people to dismiss Kiwi Farms as simple trolls, because you can't wrap your head around this level of evil," Gerber said. "That's why Kiwi Farms wasn't shut down for so long. If you try to explain what Kiwi Farms is doing to you, you sound like a paranoid schizophrenic."

Still, law enforcement may have looked into Kiwi Farms or one of its users. As far back as 2018, the website listed "warrant canary" text on the forum that told users: "We have not received any secret court orders or gag orders." The message is now gone. It's unclear what actions, if any, may have led to its removal.

IN OCTOBER 2022, six weeks after Cloudflare banned it, the Kiwi Farms website came back online. Fong-Jones explained to *BuzzFeed News* that "Joshua Moon has had to duct-tape together his own version of Cloudflare." She estimated that he is "paying hundreds if not thousands each month now" to maintain Kiwi Farms, an unsustainable sum for him. To this day, the website flickers on and off—its users continuing to inflict harm and spread hate. On October 20, Gerber tweeted that after having a miscarriage, their parents had gotten texts and emails from Kiwi Farms members "celebrating their dead grandchild & saying how happy they are my parents will die without grandkids."

Fong-Jones told me attacks on her had picked back up after she spoke publicly about her abuse. "They went after two of my colleagues," she said, posting co-workers' addresses and the names of their children and spouses to the forum. They also tried to smear her with a variety of made-up claims. "First they accused me of embezzlement," Fong-Jones told me. "When that didn't stick, they accused me of hacking," eventually elevating their claims to bogus rape accusations.

In a Telegram post at the end of November, Moon thanked the community for "sticking around through the last few months," saying Kiwi Farms traffic numbers were now rebounding. He explained that the site was still online through the help of Epik—which also provides services to sites including 8chan, Gab, and the Daily Stormer—and the Norwegian web host Terrahost.

Companies such as Cloudflare, Google, and others had the opportunity to lessen the impact of Kiwi Farms preemptively. They punted. Congress could pass stronger laws against online abuse. That seems unlikely. Law enforcement has the ability to pursue online threats. It seldom does. "I think we need the federal government to step in," Wu said. "A lot [of the harassment] I got was unquestionably a crime. It's a crime to tell someone every single day in lurid graphic terms that you're going to murder them."

Has the website with a kill count finally been killed itself? As the forum blinks on and off, the practices it honed continue to spread far beyond the confines of its pages. The forces that allowed it to thrive remain intact. Its users can flock to new platforms. After all, they shaped an internet that empowers them. And if that is the case, this question may be more haunting: Can Kiwi Farms ever die? ■

FOREVER HOME

(continued from page 41)

beginning to have supervised visitations with Bradshaw at Upper Midwest. Buckanaga, who had also been sent to an Indian boarding school as a child, chatted with Bradshaw and P.S. as they ate lunch and played. During the visit, P.S., then 6 years old, told Buckanaga that she remembered things from when she lived with Bradshaw as a toddler, like learning to Indian dance at a powwow with her cousins.

To an outsider, the moment might have been easy to miss. A Native girl, going on three years of separation from her family, recalling the powwow to two Native women, who had themselves been separated from their own families as children.

"I said, 'Oh, I think that's great.' I says, 'You know how to dance? Do you want to show us how?'" Buckanaga said.

And then, in a moment that brought Buckanaga to tears, the two women watched as P.S. put her hands on her hips and began to dance.

IN THE FOUR years since Bradshaw adopted her granddaughter, P.S. has turned into a spirited sixth grader who loves choir, math class, and skating. "She likes to do *everything*," Bradshaw says. "She keeps me on my toes."

The two are now in the awkward position of having their private lives at the center of a Supreme Court case for which they are neither plaintiffs nor defendants. Bradshaw says she is—of course—concerned about the future of ICWA and Native sovereignty, but her primary concern is P.S.'s privacy. "I want to keep my granddaughter out of it," she says.

The headlines have flattened the Cliffords and Bradshaw into two-dimensional combatants in a high-stakes custody battle, but the reality of their relationship is far more layered: Every other weekend, P.S. spends the night at the Cliffords' house. After Bradshaw adopted her granddaughter, P.S. repeatedly asked Bradshaw to see them. Bradshaw took some time to think about it. The situation seemed messy and uncomfortable, but in the end, the decision was straightforward: P.S. wanted a relationship with the Cliffords, and Bradshaw wanted P.S. to be happy.

Plus, Bradshaw feels for the couple. After all, Bradshaw, of all people, knows what it's like to almost lose a child. ■

THE ABORTION PILL'S SECRET MONEY MEN

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the suit disputes this return on investment, arguing it is far lower.)

Those same filings say that the average return on investment for everyone who invested in Danco was about 452 percent over 23 years. Even in the high-flying world of private equity—where the average annual return over the last 20 years has been about 10.5 percent—that's nothing to sneeze at. In a 2022 deposition, the CFO of Danco confirmed that "the Project has ultimately become quite successful," and investments have "been extremely profitable."

SINCE THE SUPREME COURT gutted *Roe*, demand for medication abortion has skyrocketed. One study analyzed nearly 43,000 medication requests from 30 states and found the average number of daily requests nearly tripled, driven primarily by increases in the 12 states where lawmakers have banned abortion completely. Meanwhile, two of the main digital health startups offering medication abortion by mail—Hey Jane and Choix—reported enormous jumps in interest from potential customers. Choix raised $1 million in venture capital funding in the weeks following the leak of the Supreme Court decision. In October, Hey Jane raised $6.1 million from venture capital investors, after seeing a ninefold increase in new telehealth patients per day. During the fundraising round, venture capitalists wanted to invest more in the company than Hey Jane had asked for.

All of that suggests that Danco's business is set to remain profitable, even as a cheaper generic version of mifepristone has cut into Mifeprex's business over the past few years. Just how profitable is anyone's guess—but valuable enough that Daniel and the Hawkinses have kept fighting about it. In May 2021, the Hawkinses filed a lawsuit in Delaware to wrest control of Danco from Daniel. Their goal was to put an end to what they see as Daniel's extractive, autocratic management of the company by installing a proper board to oversee him. The lawsuit also had the potential to secure more profits for the Hawkinses.

When the Danco project was restructured in the '90s and the Hawkinses' shares got moved around, a restriction was appended to their stake: Daniel, whose private equity fund controlled the investment, would hold votes attached to the shares. In other words, the Hawkinses' investment gave them the right to partake in Danco's profits, but they could not have a say in the operations of the company. That right stayed with Daniel, in the form of a proxy vote. The Hawkinses' lawsuit sought to win back their votes, ostensibly to sell their stake at a better price. (Shares that don't have votes attached are worth a lot less.)

For Daniel, the stakes are enormous. His proxy vote affords him control over company operations and, combined with his role as executive chair of Danco's board of directors—which gives him final approval of the company's budget—earns him about $455,000 in annual fees and compensation. He earns an extra $75,000 each year for work related to particular entities that are part of Danco's complex financing structure, as well as tens of thousands more for other Danco-related business. All told, Daniel has earned about $10.3 million in fees alone.

This past January, the Delaware Supreme Court sided with the Hawkinses. The consequences of the decision are still unfolding. But now that the Hawkinses have regained their shares' voting power, they have additional authority to push for changes at Danco. "Real corporate governance has been our goal," Sharon Hawkins said in a statement, "both to make sure we are treated fairly and to make sure that the full benefits of this project will be available to as many women as possible."

For both sides, each of these lawsuits have been a fight to preserve the wealth they've built through the mifepristone project, and to pave the way for earning even more—while keeping the other party from wresting away money and control. A source close to the Hawkinses, for example, called Daniel a "control freak" who hoards money from Danco for himself. Meanwhile, one of Danco's other major investors accused the Hawkinses of trying to steal the business.

Pike told me something similar. "Greg, this is basically his only asset," he said. "His billion dollars he thought he had [through LTCM], he doesn't have, and he's obsessed with not being able to control his destiny."

That destiny could not be more promising. The end of *Roe v. Wade*, mixed with the FDA's new approval of retail sales for mifepristone, could unlock immense profit. Their product's mission may be a social good, but creating value for investors—themselves—seems to have become a driving motivation: one where women faced with impossible circumstances are reduced to the impersonal language of customer capture. ■

ECONUNDRUMS

DOCTOR'S ORDERS

Would patients be safer if we let medical residents rest?

BY NATHAN KOHRMAN

WHEN I VISITED my cousin Beija in Munich last summer, her boyfriend, Julius, told me he was in his second year of surgery residency, and I was surprised by how well rested he looked. He and Beija had just returned from a boozy wedding over a long weekend, and as we watched soccer, ate schnitzel at a biergarten, and met family for lunch downtown, I kept expecting him to get a text and have to leave. But the weekend kept on rolling. It was a stark contrast to medical training in America, where residents refer to two days off in a row as a "golden weekend," and spend three to seven years working 80 hours a week. As I start my last year of medical school this year, it makes me think about American medical training in a new light.

Designed by an influential 19th-century doctor with a cocaine addiction, residency in America has had extreme hours and low compensation for more than a hundred years. Today, though most residents have nearly a decade of postsecondary education—four years college, four years medical school—most make less than $70,000 a year, and work so many hours it amounts

DOROTHY SIEMENS

to near-minimum wage. After decades of resident-led advocacy, in 2003 the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education, which oversees residency programs, capped resident hours at 80 hours a week, averaged over four weeks. In 2011, it placed a 16-hour cap on how many consecutive hours first-year residents can work, a response to research showing that a less-punishing schedule reduces serious medical errors. In 2017, the ACGME eliminated the cap on first-year resident shifts, which a recent paper found may reduce the risk of serious medical errors by 32 percent.

It's worth looking at the structural forces behind the conditions of residency in America and Europe. Medical training varies somewhat across Europe, but no matter the country, residents work far fewer hours than their American counterparts. Starting in 1998, the European Union capped working hours at 48 per week, and no more than 13 consecutive hours. Julius told me that while his contract limits him to 42 hours a week, residents sometimes work as many as 60 hours when things are particularly busy. American residents, meanwhile, often work more than 100 hours for three weeks in a row without violating regulations. A 2021 study found that more than half of North American residents suffer from burnout—a workplace malady defined by the feelings of exhaustion, cynicism, and futility—compared to 30 percent of their European counterparts.

Why are the demands of American residency so much greater? Part of it is Europe's robust labor movement. European residents are well organized and willing to strike for better working conditions. In 2016, 37,000 residents in the UK (then part of the EU) went on strike when the government proposed they work longer weekend hours without additional pay. To be sure, there are some encouraging signs in America. At LA County+USC hospital, where I'm in training, residents threatened to strike after years of making subminimum wage. The county health department, which had been stonewalling them, agreed to give them a 15 percent pay raise and a $3,000 housing stipend increase.

But only 15 percent of American residents are in a union. Many believe they have less solidarity with nurses—stalwarts of the American labor movement—than with attending physicians. Residents see themselves not as labor but as management-to-be. Senior doctors benefit from this arrangement, often delegating their most grueling work to residents, and reducing their own incentive to help reform a system that lets them sleep longer and see their family more. Hospitals, health systems, and insurance companies also benefit from the cheap, plentiful, and often excellent care that residents provide.

The ratio of doctors to sick people is also more forgiving in Europe. European countries have nearly twice as many doctors per capita as the United States does—4.9 vs. 2.6—and by most metrics, Americans are much, much sicker than Europeans. As the global health scholar Elizabeth Bradley shows, spending on social services improves health outcomes. Europeans are likely healthier because they spend more on preventive care, have a more robust safety net, and have more infrastructure for public health. Fewer Europeans end up in the hospital in the first place.

American residents can work more than 100 hours for three weeks in a row without violating regulations.

The reason there are fewer doctors per capita in the US is also straightforward. The federal government funds most residency programs, and in 1997, the number of residency spots funded by Medicare was capped at 100,000. It's increased by only 40,000 since then, even as the country's population has increased by 62 million people. Even if there were more funding, organizations like the ACGME have strict processes for granting accreditation to new residency programs. According to the sociologist Paul Starr, professional organizations have used accreditation both as a tool for improving the quality of American medical education and as a gatekeeping mechanism. It's simple labor economics: The scarcer a profession is, the higher its wages.

And Americans do earn more than European doctors. An Irish primary care physician makes on average $172,000 a year, while an American makes $220,000. But European doctors are stretched less thin. At most American teaching hospitals, residents and attending physicians have the virtually impossible task of treating patients who have fallen through our tattered safety net, all the while understaffed. Though the country faces a shortage of as many as 124,000 doctors, the American Medical Association advocates adding only 14,000 residency spots.

So what can individual residents do? In the short term, form unions. Residents are low in the pecking order but numerous and essential. Unions are their best bet to counter the powerful political forces—like hospitals and health systems—that profit from every hour of their labor. Unions would also allow residents to advocate for longer-term policy reform more effectively. Since training new doctors takes a decade at least, unions could push for more nurse practitioners, physician assistants, and clinical pharmacists to help reduce residents' workload by managing patients' chronic diseases, like diabetes. (The AMA has lobbied to prevent states from allowing non-physician providers to perform this type of care, even under supervision of a doctor.) Unions could also pressure lawmakers to get rid of the cap on Medicare-funded residency spots, and to fund social programs that keep patients out of the hospital.

But some of the barriers to reform are psychological. There's a perceived valor to medical training. We feel special yet selfless, and it makes us easy to exploit, and even makes us defend the conditions of our own exploitation. In Europe, residents understand on a deeper level that the time they spend relaxing in a biergarten can be as important to their education—and providing good-quality care—as the time they spend learning to suture in the OR. ■

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FOOD FOR THOUGHT

A WHALE OF A PROBLEM

Should sustainable seafood assessments care about human livelihoods?

BY JACKIE FLYNN MOGENSEN

THE NORTH ATLANTIC right whale isn't doing well. Fewer than 350 of these stocky creatures are thought to remain—and their numbers are shrinking. In the last six years, vessel strikes, entanglements in fishing gear, and unknown causes have killed or injured at least 92 animals, putting the whales at risk of disappearing forever.

To help save the species, two major environmental groups have urged consumers to rethink their seafood choices, particularly lobster: Last fall, the Marine Stewardship Council, the world's largest seafood eco-label, and the Monterey Bay Aquarium's Seafood Watch program, a popular US-based seafood guide, ruled that Maine lobster was no longer rated "sustainable" or considered a "good alternative" due to the risk the fishery—and its vertical fishing lines, which run from a float on top to a trap on the seabed floor—poses to right whales. In response, meal kit company HelloFresh pulled lobster from its menus, and Whole Foods announced it would temporarily stop selling lobster fished in the Gulf of Maine.

The red listings didn't sit well with top lawmakers in Maine, which is responsible for landing 80 percent of American lobster—about 100 million pounds per year—and hundreds of millions of dollars in sales. Maine's congressional leaders called it a form of "activism" and "a slap in the face" to the state's 4,500 lobster fishers.

To some degree, that was the point. Seafood Watch and MSC do *environmental* assessments: When making their decisions, these guides consider ecological factors like the health of the lobster population (which, in the Gulf of Maine, is thriving), the impact of fishing on other species and the habitat, and the effectiveness of how the fishery is managed. Largely left out of the equation, by design, is human welfare—things like jobs or the economy or lobster's cultural importance to the state.

But should it be? That's up for debate. In 2018, Seafood Watch helped launch an early version of what is now the Seafood Social Risk Tool, which helps businesses assess potential human rights abuses in their supply chains. When I asked Jennifer Dianto Kemmerly, the aquarium's vice president of global ocean initiatives, if she thought Seafood Watch should also take people's livelihoods into account, she said there are currently no plans to do so.

A few other organizations have taken that step. In 2015, Fair Trade USA, a certifier of equitably made products in North America, launched a seafood label that measures socioeconomic factors, like safe working conditions, ethical labor practices, and "sustainable livelihoods," in addition to environmental standards.

But combining ecological factors with social and economic ones can be tricky. For instance, asks Martin Smith, a professor and marine economist at Duke University, "Can you put something like Maine lobster on the green list for its labor practices...and still have it on the red list for your conservation concern?" This would force eco-labels and ratings programs to choose between conflicting values—in this case, whales' lives and people's livelihoods. And it's not just right whales: A handful of other species, including the Pacific leatherback sea turtle, the Steller sea lion, and the vaquita, one of the world's smallest porpoises, have also been indirectly threatened by fishing activity, sparking similar strife over jobs and animal survival.

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The good news is, in Maine, regulators may be able to save both. With the support of the government, some lobster fishers are experimenting with "on-demand" fishing gear, a technology that can raise traps off the seafloor with pop-up buoys or inflatable lift bags, eliminating much of the risk to whales. Last year, Congress passed a bill that allocated $20 million to fund these sorts of technologies.

There isn't much time left for debate. Federal scientists estimate that right whales can sustain only one death per year, and while there were none recorded in 2022, there were four known entanglements and one vessel strike. "Is one whale worth 1,000 jobs? 2,000 jobs? Five communities? 10 communities?" asks Frank Asche, a natural resource economist at the University of Florida. "Nobody really wants to make that decision." Yet if the whales can be saved at all, we may have to. ■

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